

TURKEY'S MISSION IMPOSSIBLE



WAR AND PEACE WITH THE KURDS



Cengiz Çandar
Foreword by Eugene Rogan

Turkey's Mission Impossible

Kurdish Societies, Politics, and International Relations

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To my dear friends and all those Kurds and Turks who suffer and have suffered, within Turkey's prisons and without, under injustice and tyranny.

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Foreword

The Kurdish question emerged from the breakup of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of World War I. A century later, it remains one of the most intractable problems to arise from the postwar partition of Ottoman lands.

A distinct ethnic community in the multinational Ottoman Empire, the Kurds were a fully assimilated part of the Ottoman body politic. Their cultural rights were respected, with Kurdish recognized as one of many national languages in the polyglot Ottoman state. In their majority Sunni Muslims, the Kurds fully shared in the dominant religious culture of the Ottoman state and recognized the Sultan as both a temporal and, in his role as Caliph, as a spiritual leader. While Kurdish intellectuals began to argue for a distinct national identity within Ottoman society, there was no separatist movement among the Kurdish communities before World War I. Instead, Ottoman Kurds fought to preserve the Empire and their place within it.

All was to change with Ottoman defeat in the Great War. In October 1918, the Kurds confronted a post-Ottoman world. Like other distinct national communities in the Middle East (the Arabs leap to mind), the Kurds began to consider the possibility of national independence, as well as the risks of falling under European colonial domination. Yet the European Powers had other plans for the Kurds.

Throughout the four years of the war, the Entente Powers had negotiated the partition and distribution of key Ottoman territories to Russia, Britain, and France. With the Entente's victory, Britain and France sought to conclude their territorial gains as war prizes. Bolshevik Russia, for its part, disavowed all prior claims staked by the Tsarist regime. In spite of this Russian concession, relations between the Bolsheviks and Russia's wartime allies were tense.

The British, in particular, were determined to create a buffer between Russia and French positions in Syria as well as Britain's claims in Iraq.

Toward this end, the British supported the creation of a Kurdish autonomous zone in Southeast Anatolia as part of the postwar settlement.

The international community formalized the establishment of Kurdistan in the Treaty of Sèvres, signed by the Entente and the Ottoman Empire in August 1920. Section III of the Treaty called for “a scheme of local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas lying east of the Euphrates, south of the southern boundary of Armenia . . . and north of the frontier of Turkey with Syria and Mesopotamia.” Article 64 of the Treaty gave the Kurdish people the right to apply for independent statehood after just one year of autonomy in both Turkish Kurdistan and “that part of Kurdistan which has hitherto been included in the Mosul Vilayet”—that is, what would now be called Iraqi Kurdistan.

As we all know, the promise of a Kurdish state was never realized. Kurdistan fell victim to the Turkish War of Independence. Aside from the Dersim insurrection (in modern Tunceli) in which Kurdish militias fought against the Turkish army, the Kurds chose neutrality or to side with Kemalist forces between 1920 and 1922. When Ismet İnönü went to Lausanne to negotiate a new peace treaty with the Entente, he ultimately secured the whole of Thrace and Anatolia, including the areas allocated under the treaty of Sèvres to the Kurdish autonomous region, as Turkish sovereign territory in the Treaty of Lausanne. Turkey and Britain referred the Mosul question to the League of Nations to resolve, and in the end, the League awarded Mosul to the British mandate of Iraq. The hope of national independence lost, the Kurds found themselves divided between four new states: Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Persia (modern Iran).

The new Turkish Republic abandoned the old Ottoman tolerance for Kurdish language and culture. In a bid to forge a unified Turkish culture, the government passed laws in 1924 to ban the teaching and public use of Kurdish languages. The government forcibly resettled influential Kurds in Western Turkey to disperse their influence. So long as Kurds spoke Turkish and assimilated, their place in the Turkish Republic was assured. But any bid for Kurdish cultural rights was rejected as potential separatism and an existential threat to the Turkish Republic within its Anatolian frontiers. Challenges to these rules—the Sheikh Said Revolt of 1925, or the Dersim Uprising of 1937–1938—were suppressed by the Kemalist state with overwhelming violence.

For decades, the Turkish state held Kurdish aspirations under firm control until August 1984, when a sustained Kurdish insurgency broke out in Eastern Turkey headed by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). Since then, the Turkish government has alternated between forceful suppression of the Kurdish uprising and diplomacy.

It would be no exaggeration to say that the Kurdish issue has been the most important domestic story for the Turkish press since 1984. The doyen of that press corps is without doubt Cengiz Çandar. Through his personal contacts with Kurdish leaders and his willingness to assist Turkish government initiatives to pursue a negotiated resolution, he has been eyewitness to what he aptly terms “Turkey’s mission impossible.” Indeed, Çandar reveals in this book details of the Turkish-Kurdish peace process that have never been related before. Starting with his first initiative under President Turgut Özal in 1993, Çandar takes the reader into heart of the Turkish-Kurdish labyrinth.

Taking the Turkish-Kurdish conflict as his most important life’s work, Çandar opens his book with a concession of defeat. Yet in reading his text, I sense frustration more than defeat. Indeed, writing this book is a means of preserving the good that was achieved in nearly three decades of hard negotiations. We the readers are implicated in an issue that, a century on, remains unresolved. Our job is to keep our governments from letting Kurdish rights slip from the agenda, and to press for the peaceful resolution of their legitimate demands. In that sense, I wish for this book the widest possible readership.

Eugene Rogan
Director
The Middle East Centre
The University of Oxford

Notes on Spelling and Transliteration

I have translated all of the quotations that I used in the book from Turkish to English. For the Turkish and Kurdish names, I followed modern Turkish spellings for the most part. For instance, since the official name of the city in Turkish is İstanbul, I preferred to use the capital İ, instead of Istanbul as it is written in English. In Turkish, both letters *i* and *ı* exist, as do *g* and *ğ*. The surname of the president of Turkey is Erdoğan. In the quotations from original English sources, I left it as Erdogan, but whenever I referred to him, I opted for Erdoğan. I applied the same rule for the name Talât in Turkish. In quotations from English-language sources I quoted the name as Talaat, while in my references, I used its Turkish form, Talât. Also for names that include the letters *c* and *ç*, as in my own name and surname, I stuck to the modern Turkish spellings instead of clarifying them in English as *dj* and *ch*. In some English sources, the name Cavit was spelled as Djavid, and I retained this spelling when quoted. I applied the same rule for the Turkish letter *ş*. Instead of writing *sh*, I kept *ş* as in the name Şahin.

For the Kurdish names, I used the Latin alphabet for the Northern Kurdish language (Kurmanji) developed by Jaladat Bedirkhan (Celadet Bedirhan) in 1931. For the Syrian Kurdish town, I preferred to use Kobanê, instead of writing Kobani as it is written in Turkish. However, there were specific cases like the name of the city of Sulaimaniyah in the Sorani-Kurdish speaking part of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Its inhabitants use the Latin transliteration of Sorani-Kurdish, Sulaimani, yet it is registered as Süleymaniye (in Turkish) as a former Ottoman town. Thus, various spellings such as Sulaimaniyah, Sulaimaniya, and Sulaymaniyah are alternately used, as I did in the book.

Writing *Turkey's Mission Impossible*

It was February 2017 in Beirut. I was delivering a speech at the Institute of Palestine Studies, the respected research center where I had enjoyed the privilege to speak on Turkey's Middle East policy several times in the last decade. My talk was entitled "New Turkey: A Revival of the Ottomans or the Last Phase of the Ottoman State?" In front of an audience comprising the Lebanese and Palestinian political and cultural elite, I commenced my talk with a self-criticism that would not normally be anticipated from me. It was almost half a year since an autocratic regime had begun to establish itself in Turkey, and the peaceful settlement of the Kurdish question had already turned into a pipedream. With these two developments, my decades-old career had seemingly ended in failure.

"I concede my defeat," I said, and reminded them of the myth of Sisyphus in ancient Greece. Sisyphus was the heir to the throne of Thessaly in central Greece, yet he was condemned to eternal punishment for his offenses against the gods. He was doomed to roll a massive rock up to the top of a steep hill. His efforts were always in vain for whenever Sisyphus neared the top, the rock would roll all the way back down and Sisyphus had to start all over again. "The lives of myself and many in my generation connoted the task of Sisyphus. We tried to roll up the rock, and every time we were near the summit, it rolled down and we obstinately started from scratch all over again."

"But this time," I continued, "it is different, because I have neither the energy to push the rock back uphill, nor the time left for it." Notwithstanding with the futility of our efforts and our refusal to surrender completely to the bitter facts, I said, "I can find consolation in the truth that, at least, we tried. That will be our legacy for the future generations."

If before my Beirut talk I had read *An Artist of the Floating World* by Kazuo Ishiguro, the Japanese-British novelist who won the Nobel Literature

Prize in 2017, I could have modified my introductory statement. Ishiguro wrote:

A man who aspires to rise above the mediocre, to be something more than the ordinary, surely deserves admiration, even if he fails and loses a fortune on account of his ambitions. . . . If one has failed only where others have not had the courage or will to try, there is consolation—indeed, deep satisfaction—to be gained from his observation when looking back over one's life.¹

What Ishiguro had written is a better description of me and many people of my generation than what I tried to depict with the myth of Sisyphus.

Taking courage from his portrayal, writing this book, *Turkey's Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds*, is in a sense an effort to keep trying.

Although this is by no means a literary work, I found many commonalities between my book and Kazuo Ishiguro's novels. His novels, for example, often times end without a resolution, and the issues that his characters confront are buried in the past and they too remain unresolved. Thus, Ishiguro ends many of his novels on a note of melancholic resignation. *Turkey's Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds*, I must say, has a similar spirit, follows a similar pattern, and arguably ends in a similar way.

Ishiguro's characters accept their past and embrace what they become, typically discovering that this realization brings comfort, and an end to mental anguish. That also, partly, explains my motivation for writing this book. I too accept my past and who I have become. Writing becomes therefore a sort of obligation to myself, to bring at least relative comfort and resolution of my anguish.

An Artist of the Floating World is an examination of the turmoil in postwar Japan, seen through the eyes of a man who is rejected by the future and who chooses to reject his own past. This served as an excellent metaphor for my book: peace with the Kurds is rejected by the future, and they (the Kurds) and we (all those who have wanted to resolve the conflict through compromise and in human dignity) have chosen to reject the past. That rejected past was shaped by the war with the Kurds.

Yet, *Turkey's Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds* could never have been written, at least in its current form, if there had been no coup attempt in Turkey on the night of July 15, 2016. The coup found me in Stockholm where I was busy with my five-month residency at the Stockholm University Institute for Turkish Studies. Two months later I was to begin my one-year residence at the Middle East Centre of St Antony's College, University of Oxford. Prof. Eugene Rogan, director of the Centre and a brilliant historian of the Modern Middle East and late Ottoman period, had

sponsored my participation. I had encountered Eugene Rogan's name for the first time in 2010 while visiting *Blackwell's*, the legendary bookshop in Oxford. It was inscribed over a brick-thick volume entitled *The Arabs* sitting solidly on the shelf. The publication was brand new and I was fascinated by a quick glance through its seemingly endless pages. I purchased it without any hesitation. A few years later what, for some, would be his magnum opus, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East, 1914–1920* was fresh on the market. Probably I was lucky enough to be one of its earliest readers when by mere coincidence I discovered it on its first day in Berlin's famous bookshop *Dussmann das Kulturkaufhaus*, in 2015. I avidly consumed it over a couple of hours.

With this background, I could not have been happier when I received an invitation from Eugene Rogan to deliver a talk on Turkey's Kurdish question in October 2015. I was exhilarated speaking at the new auditorium of St Antony's, a project newly completed by the renowned Iraqi-British architect Zaha Hadid. What was more important though was getting to know Eugene Rogan in person and becoming good friends with him.

A few days after my conference at the University of Oxford, in Turkey's re-run elections President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his party the AKP succeeded in reversing the results of the elections held on June 7, 2015. The results had denied single-party rule for the AKP and thus the constitutional amendments for the executive presidency, which would signify Turkey's drift to authoritarian rule under Erdoğan. Turkey's move from a relatively democratic political climate toward a twilight zone with gloomy prospects could be anticipated. The day after the elections, I received an e-mail message from Eugene Rogan. Its ending was brief and simple: "After this election result, you might want to seek asylum in Oxford."

As if confirming his worries about me, the week after the elections, I received a notice informing me that President Erdoğan was suing me for my six op-ed pieces published in July and August 2015 on the daily *Radikal* where I was the senior columnist. I was accused of "insulting the President" and, according to Turkish Penal Code, if convicted I could serve six years in prison. Each one of the articles that allegedly "insulted the President" was critical of Erdoğan's termination of the Kurdish peace process and the resumption of war.

I decided to take "intellectual refuge" for a while. Stockholm University Institute for Turkish Studies was interested in providing visiting scholar status for me, and I committed myself to do research and write a book on "Turkey's failed Kurdish peace processes." I had, after all, been actively involved in those processes over a long period, and I felt an obligation to put into print Turkey's dismal experience with an issue, which indeed had long since become my lifetime commitment.

Oxford would follow Stockholm. I would undertake a mission as well. With the endowment provided for that purpose, I would establish the Jalal Talabani Programme for Kurdish Studies, as one of the sub-units of the Middle East Centre. It would be a tribute to Jalal Talabani, the former President of Iraq, an old and very dear personal friend of mine who was incapacitated because of a stroke in December 2012. He sadly remained paralyzed, able to see with only one eye, and had lost his faculty of speech. I visited him in Suleymaniyah, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and told him about the project. Although unable to talk, he could follow and understand whatever was told him, and I noted the tear in his good eye.

I visited Oxford several times for these arrangements. Eugene Rogan introduced me to internationally acclaimed historians who were associated with St Antony's, Avi Shlaim and Norman Davies, whose names I held in high esteem. Avi Shlaim was considered a leading figure among Israel's New Historians, the revisionist group that made a revolutionary impact on the historiography of the Palestine question, challenging the traditional versions of Israeli history and turning the official Israeli narrative upside down. Talking with Avi Shlaim and Eugene Rogan in St Antony's Middle East Centre about its founder, the legendary Albert Hourani, gave me the feeling that becoming an Antonian would be the crown of my decades-old career concerning the Middle East.

Besides establishing the Jalal Talabani Programme for Kurdish Studies at the Middle East Centre of St Antony, I pledged to Eugene Rogan to write a book about "Turkey's Failed Kurdish Peace Processes."

In March 2016, the owner of *Radikal*, Turkey's leading opinion paper and the only surviving liberal voice of Turkish media, finally pulled the plug as a concession to President Erdoğan. For the broader interests of the publishing group that were running other businesses, putting *Radikal* out of business was a gesture addressed to Erdoğan. Thus, critical views against the government would be denied a voice and its senior columnist—me—would be silenced.

My forty-year professional journalistic life had come to an end. Soon after, I arrived in the tranquility of Stockholm bearing the title "Distinguished Visiting Scholar" at the Stockholm University Institute for Turkish Studies. In the congenial atmosphere I enjoyed at the Institute—and as I tried to adapt to the Scandinavian tranquil rhythm which is almost the total opposite of the nervous vibrancy of my homeland—I was taking the preliminary steps in my research on "Turkey's Failed Peace Processes."

The coup in my homeland found me the very hour I arrived back at my temporary apartment in Stockholm, from Vienna where I had been working for two days. I had been taking notes on some confidential documents concerning secret talks between Turkish officials and PKK representatives that were kept by a person who had been involved. That was an essential part of my research.

Connecting to the internet, I could not believe what I saw on my screen: putting up checkpoints on the Bosphorus Bridge, military columns had seized control from the Asian side to the European side of İstanbul. There was a military coup underway, and it had started only ten, fifteen minutes ago! This was not a joke. It was real.

With over half a century of experience of Turkish military coups, I did not find this one convincing at all. It was real, but not convincing; it looked too amateurish, as if designed to fail from the very beginning. My hunch was that the coup was doomed to failure and the repercussions would be very severe—for my country and, more importantly, for its people.

I spent a large part of my adult life being very hostile to the repeated coups and also any other kind of military intervention in civilian politics. It is almost public knowledge in Turkey that the military establishment and I have been at odds most of the time.

Therefore, it was only natural that I would wish for the failure of the coup attempt on that Friday night, July 15. It eventually did fail—and my worries were confirmed with the relentless crackdown targeting hundreds if not thousands of people who had nothing to do with the coup, including my fellow journalists, academicians, and colleagues.

Less than a week after the failed coup, Turkey suspended the European Convention on Human Rights and declared a state of emergency.

There could be no serious academic life and activity. My research project and the book I wanted to write could not be carried out in Turkey. The content and the leitmotif could easily be criminalized. This is not an aberration. Among my close friends and colleagues with whom I had taken part in certain activities regarding the Kurdish issue, many are jailed including some without indictment.

Despite the deserved appeal of Britain's highly prestigious higher education institutions, the Brexit decision to move away from the European Union, which came a month before the coup attempt in Turkey and its giant step toward autocracy, meant that Britain was looking precarious to me. The permanent unease I would feel due to the situation in Turkey, combined with the restrictions Brexit might entail, would deprive me of the peace of mind that was an essential element for what I would be working on. For that, I needed freedom; not only freedom of the mind, but a vast space of free movement. Continental Europe and its larger Schengen area extending from Portugal to Greece, from Iceland to Malta, would provide me with that freedom.

Sweden, a member of the European Union, is in continental Europe. It is admittedly somewhat remote from Europe's nerve centers, but at the heart of Scandinavia and immersed in Nordic mystery and tranquility, it has considerable appeal in many respects. Its natural beauty and the serene friendliness of

its people make it even more attractive for souls exhausted by the conflicts and turmoil of the Middle East. Modesty and honesty shine as social characteristics of the Swedes, and the liberal atmosphere and cosmopolitan texture of the uniquely beautiful city of Stockholm provided the essential ingredients for the writing of this book.

A Turkish friend of mine who has been living Stockholm for an extended period, said to me one day, as if consoling me for being so far from my homeland, "You know what, the best part of living here for you is that it is an ideal place to write books. So tranquil and easygoing, just what you will need." It was true. It is not by coincidence that for many decades, it has been the favorite residence for the Kurdish political and literary elite in exile, who in time were followed by tens of thousands of their kin. Living in Stockholm I have encountered numerous astute Kurds from Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria who have transformed into loyal and responsible Swedish subjects fully integrated into their adopted country, while keeping strong attachment to their ethnic identity and commitment to their homelands. In Sweden, they freely exercised the ethnic and civil rights of which they were deprived in their home countries; in this way, they became good Swedes while preserving their Kurdishness. I encountered the same sentiments even more strongly in the Syriac-Chaldean and Assyrian Christians who have emigrated to Sweden in tens of thousands from the southeastern part of my country, Iraq, and Syria—that is, Upper Mesopotamia.

Their presence in Sweden, their warmth, hospitality, and excessive manifestation of solidarity they displayed to me—typical of our Sharq (East), contrasting with the reserved demeanor of the Nordic people—has been an additional input to facilitate my life and my work. To my astonishment, there were instances when I was also recognized by Kurds who were not my compatriots. I met with bus drivers who introduced themselves as Iranian Kurds and expressed their gratitude to me for my advocacy of Kurdish rights, and invited me to their homes. That was very moving indeed, at a time when my homeland had developed into a brutal setting with no rule of law, where many of my colleagues and friends were suffering, either behind bars or at large.

Being surrounded by these people in Sweden became a constant reminder for me to accomplish the task of writing this book as a permanent reference about our shared history and collective saga.

In time, I also conceived that ironically there could be no other place more interesting than Sweden in which to write a book on a perennial war atmosphere and subsequent peace efforts. It has been over 200 years since Sweden was last at war. This country, which espoused neutrality during a century stigmatized by two devastating wars on a global scale, has taken the lead in mediation of international conflicts some of which are thousands of miles away. From Folke Bernadotte who was assassinated by a terrorist gang in Jerusalem

four days before my birth while trying to mediate between the Israelis and Palestinians in Jerusalem, to Dag Hammarskjöld, the secretary-general of the United Nations, who died in Congo on his road to stop the bloodshed in the central African nation, Sweden has been a country whose best children have fallen martyrs to peace. Its historical personalities like Prime Minister Olof Palme and Foreign Minister Anna Lindh, both friends of the Kurdish people and the oppressed of the world, were assassinated at the heart of peaceful Stockholm, which was and still is deservedly considered a very safe and secure city. That is a paradox indeed, and one that made it attractive to me, as a Turk, to undertake the mission of writing a fair and accurate account of the conflict between my state and my Kurdish compatriots, under the paradoxical title *Turkey's Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds*.

Turkey's Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds was written wherever I have been during the past three years, on the Greek islands in the Ionian Sea or in my beloved Aegean; or even on the road, on trains in Sweden and the United Kingdom, onboard airplanes over the skies of Europe, and across the ocean to the United States. Yet it was mostly in Stockholm and Berlin, my two domiciles other than İstanbul, that the final touches were made.

Stockholm and Berlin (October–November 2019)

NOTE

1. Kazuo Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 134.

Introduction

The preamble of the Communist Manifesto of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848 stated: “A specter is haunting Europe—the *specter of communism*. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this specter: Pope and Tsar, Metternich and Guizot, French Radicals and German police-spies.”¹ Similarly, since the aftermath of World War I, the specter of the Kurdish question has haunted the Middle East, and Turkey more than anywhere else. All the new states of the postwar Middle East—Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria—established an unholy alliance to exorcise this specter, irrespective of their regimes.

Yes, a specter has been haunting Turkey for almost a hundred years—the specter of the Kurdish question. Ever since its foundation as a Turkish Republic over the debris of the Ottoman Empire that could not survive World War I, Turkey has been vacillating between war and peaceful settlement of the problem with the Kurds. Throughout this rather long period, it stood closer to war than to peaceful resolution of the conflict.

It can equally be asserted that the specter of the Kurdish question has been haunting the region of the Middle East ever since the imposition of the infamous Sykes-Picot Agreement dividing the Ottoman territories in a way that ultimately led the Kurdish subjects of the Ottoman Empire to find themselves subjects of the Turkish nation-state, which is mostly situated in Asia Minor, the Arab state of Iraq in Mesopotamia, and another Arab state, Syria, in the Levant in the postwar regional order. Including Iran, where they have constituted a sizeable population, the Kurds were dispersed in four major countries in the region of the Middle East.

Among the four states with significant Kurdish populations in the post-World War I regional order, Turkey is a special case. Almost half of the

Kurds in the world are citizens of Turkey. Despite the absence of official and reliable statistics on where the Kurds live in the Middle East, there are estimates based on population statistics and various other data, mainly provided by the Kurdish Institute in Paris. Accordingly, it is estimated that in 2016, 12.2 million Kurds inhabited an area of about 230,000 square kilometers in southeastern and eastern parts of Turkey that the Kurds themselves call Northern Kurdistan. The Kurds comprise 86 percent of the population in this area. The Turkish citizens of Kurdish descent who inhabit the Turkish-majority regions of Turkey and those in the European diaspora are estimated at between 7 and 10 million. Turkey's megapolis, the former imperial capital İstanbul rather sarcastically considered as the largest Kurdish city in the world with its more than 3 million Kurds. The Kurds of Turkey thus are estimated to have a population ranging between 15 and 20 million. The most modest estimate indicates them as making up around 20 percent, that is to say one-fifth, of Turkey's population. The more probable ratio, though, is 25 percent, which makes a quarter of Turkey's population. Also notable is that their reproductive rate is twice that of Turks.

The minimum estimate for the total number of Kurds in the world is 36.4 million, although the actual number may climb as high as 45.6 million. Either way, Kurds of Turkey constitute half of the total Kurdish population of the world. For the rest, about 18 percent live in Iran and Iraq each, and slightly more than 5 percent in Syria. In all these countries other than Iran, Kurds constitute the second largest ethnic group.

In the first draft of this book, these lines had composed the bulk of the introduction. Later, I changed my mind and decided they would be better as the introduction to the introduction. The specter that has been haunting Turkey and the region of the Middle East as a whole in the twentieth century, and continues to do so in the twenty-first, has undeniably affected the lives of millions—and similarly continues to do so. That specter has shaped the domestic and foreign policies of the countries where Kurds live as scattered but significant communities and contiguous territories.

Kurdistan, never a defined political entity but a geographical concept, is, with no access to seas, mostly an area of high, impassable mountains, stiff hilltops riven with deep gorges holding wild creeks and streams, tributaries to the rivers Euphrates and Tigris that created Mesopotamia, the cradle of early civilizations of humankind. It is, in many parts, a breathtaking landscape inhabited since time immemorial, a people who almost never formed a sovereign government of their own but never conceded to be ruled by others. They were unruly people, who were at peace with the tough topography of their homeland. Resisting being subdued by the nation-state formats into which they were forced to accommodate themselves, they subscribed to the motto: Kurds have no friends but mountains.

The Age of Extremes—or the short twentieth century, 1914–1991, as coined by British historian Eric Hobsbawm (1917–2012)—pulled the Kurds into themselves as never before. Although their attachment to the mountains survived, they were a large and scattered tribal community with no political significance. They have transformed to become a variable and a constant in international relations, and primarily as a determinant in the equations of the Middle East.

In the Middle East, Turkey is a regional power, allegedly with global appeal; and the Kurds, as one of the largest stateless national communities of the world, exist in contrasting aspirations. That phenomenon makes the study of Turkey's conflict with the Kurds ever essential and exciting, as the Middle East is the leading geopolitical region of the world with strong impact on global peace and conflict.

II

Writing a book at this particular historical conjuncture was incumbent upon me because of my lifelong involvement with the Kurdish issue and active participation in the quest for the peaceful, political settlement of the conflict. My involvement with the Kurdish issue in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq goes back forty-seven years. The relationship I had with Turkish Kurds, Syrian Kurdish leadership in the early 1970s, and most importantly with late Jalal Talabani (1933–2017), a historical figure and the first president of Iraq after the downfall of Saddam Hussein, led me to play a role in the establishment of relations between the Turkish state and the Iraqi Kurdish leadership in 1991. Those relations became iconoclastic and landmark developments in the history of Turkey and the Kurds. I was the intermediary between Turkey's then president Turgut Özal (1927–1993) and two Iraqi Kurdish leaders Jalal Talabani and Masoud Barzani in 1991. Talabani served as the president of Iraq from 2006 to 2014 and the latter as the first elected president of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG) from 2005 to 2017. Upon Turgut Özal's invitation, I acted as an advisor to the President of Turkey, mainly on Kurdish affairs, from 1991 until his death in 1993; a status that enabled me to take initiatives as President Özal's envoy for the reconciliation between the Turkish state and Turkey's Kurdish insurgents. Including Abdullah Öcalan, the undisputed leader of the PKK (the Kurdish acronym for the Kurdistan Workers' Party [*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*]), I have had the opportunity to have face-to-face contacts with leading Kurdish personalities of different political creed in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria, as well as with almost all the Turkish policymakers since the 1990s on, to exchange views on the Kurdish question.



Figure 1.1 Iconoclastic Meeting in Ankara, 1992. Turkey's President Özal (fourth from left) receiving anti-Saddam Iraqi opposition delegation. On his right and left, the Kurdish leaders Jalal Talabani and Masoud Barzani. Author was the architect of the meeting. *Source:* Author's Personal Archive.

In March 2009, President Abdullah Gül of Turkey conveyed through me the message about the reconciliation on the Kurdish issue that was kept secret until that date. He invited me to accompany him on his official visit to Iran, which he chose as an opportunity to disclose what would later be called the “Kurdish Opening,” the initiative of the Turkish government to resolve the ongoing conflict via political means. The Kurdish Opening was inaugurated publicly at the end of August 2009 at a meeting with a group of intellectuals, chaired by the then interior minister who was entrusted to be the official coordinator of the Opening. I was among the group, and before the meeting I had a private one-on-one session with the minister upon his invitation. Thus, since the early 1990s, I was involved, at a certain level, in almost all stages of the efforts to resolve the Kurdish question of Turkey.

From 2011 on, I have been a member of the Council of Experts of the Democratic Progress Institute (DPI) based in London. My colleagues in the Council, including Jonathan Powell, chief of staff of former British prime minister Tony Blair (1997–2007) and chief British negotiator on Northern Ireland, consisted of people with expertise on conflict resolution who had taken part in peace talks extending from the ETA-Basque case in Spain to Colombia and the Philippines. With the DPI, I have participated in the initiative to bring parliamentarians of the mainstream political parties, leading public intellectuals, journalists, and academicians in Turkey on fact-finding visits to comparative conflict resolution cases, such as South Africa, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, to analyze their possible relevance and find inspiration in resolving Turkey's perennial Kurdish question.

I was also among the founding members of the Contact and Dialogue Group initiated by Osman Kavala, leading peace activist and philanthropist who was jailed by the Turkish autocracy in 2017 and remained in prison

without any indictment for a long period. The Contact and Dialogue Group, which brought together prominent names in Turkey with diverse views and political affiliations, was particularly active and functional during the interregnum when violence related to Kurdish conflict had erupted once again in 2012. It tried to resume the dialogue between the belligerents, the Turkish state, and the Kurdish insurgents and their affiliates.

Eric Hobsbawm, in the preface of his autobiography *Interesting Times*, wrote, “When, having written the history of the world between the late eighteenth century and 1914, I finally tried my hand at the history of what I called *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century*, I think it benefited from the fact that I wrote about it not only as a scholar but as what the anthropologists call a ‘participant observer.’”²

In these lines, I found the perfect description of myself as the author of *Turkey’s Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds*: participant observer!

Thanks to my exclusive, extensive, and unique experiences concerning the Kurdish question over decades, I am privy to information on this sensitive issue that has never been brought into public knowledge, and am therefore in possession of invaluable anecdotes.

It is public knowledge in Turkey that I, along with my intimate friend and fellow journalist Hasan Cemal, have been the most prolific writers on the Kurdish issue, peace process, reconciliation efforts, and the daily developments related to Kurds in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. The archive attests to the fact that from July 2011, when the first peace process was terminated with the resumption of violence until March 2016, the end of my active journalistic career in Turkey, I wrote around 250 op-ed pieces on the Kurdish issue alone. That is roughly one piece a week. These were not products of an intellectual whose residence was an ivory tower of newspaper offices or academic centers. Most of them were written while reporting on the ground and through field experience. I have stepped foot on almost every inch of the territory that Kurds of Turkey and Iraq inhabit, and have also resided in Syria and Lebanon.

During the past decade, I have attended very many conferences, workshops, and seminars on the Kurdish issue, Syria, and Middle East politics from İstanbul to Diyarbakır, the city perceived as the political center of Turkey’s Kurds, from Beirut to Doha, from Erbil and Suleimaniyah to Baghdad in Kurdistan Region and Iraq, and from Brussels to Washington in the Western world, at respected academic institutions from Harvard to Oxford and the London School of Economics.

When my forty-year professional journalism career came to a halt in March 2016, eight months after the Kurdish peace process collapsed in Turkey, I decided to move on to the academic field to do further research and work on the failure of the peace efforts. This obviously was not alien territory for me.

For a decade, I had lectured in the capacity of adjunct professor for the senior classes of several private universities in İstanbul on the Modern History of the Middle East, the formative period of the troubled region post-World War I, which held the origins of almost all the current intractable problems, ranging from the Palestinian question to the Kurdish issue.

When I began my research in May 2016 on “Turkey’s Failed Kurdish Peace Processes” at the Stockholm University Institute for Turkish Studies as a “Distinguished Visiting Scholar,” I was confident to take the challenge.

My self-confidence was reaffirmed reading the new introduction that Cambridge historian Richard J. Evans wrote for the 2018 edition of E. H. Carr’s classic *What Is History?*, which has always been my guide on the philosophy of history and historiography. Evans began his introduction by familiarizing the reader with E. H. Carr:

E.H. Carr (1892–1982) was not a professional historian in any sense of the term that would be acceptable today. He did not have a degree in History. He never taught in a History Department at a University. . . . He did not take a Ph.D., nowadays the conventional route into the academic profession. On graduating in 1916, he went straight into the Foreign Office, where he remained for the next twenty years. . . . When in 1936 he resigned from Foreign Office to take up a Chair at Aberystwyth University . . . [he] spent increasing amounts of time practicing journalism while employed by the University. He became Assistant Editor of *The Times* in 1941 and wrote many leading articles for the newspaper until leaving his post in 1946. . . . Carr thus approached history from the angle of someone who had spent his life working for the Foreign Office and for a national newspaper. These influences and experiences strongly colored his views about history and how it should be studied.³

As an amateurish historian who does not hold a PhD, like my source of admiration and inspiration E. H. Carr, and a journalist who practiced the job for a period three times longer than his, writing the story of Turkey’s war and peace with the Kurds was a challenge I thought I could undertake.

The experience of my decades-old involvement with the issue, my direct relationship with the main protagonists—a cast ranging from former President of Turkey Turgut Özal, to the current one, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, his predecessor Abdullah Gül, the late president of Iraq, Jalal Talabani, the first president of Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Masoud Barzani, the leader of the Kurdish insurgency in Turkey and the source of inspiration for Kurdish self-rule in Syria, Abdullah Öcalan, and the legendary guerilla leader of the Kurds, Murat Karayılan—provided invaluable insights in shaping my views on the road to peace and keeping an account on the war.

Providing exclusive information of historical value that I have been privy to throughout my experience, which has never been published or spoken

anywhere publicly will, I hope, make the book unique. The content supported by anecdotes in my records and memory, again, are of historical value and importance as they are about my intimate encounters with the historical figures in defining the future of Turkey and the Kurds. As such, the book has the ambition of contributing to the historical record.

III

In 2010, I was entrusted to write a report on how to proceed to resolve Turkey's perennial Kurdish question, entitled "'Leaving the Mountain': How May the PKK Lay Down Arms" and subtitled "Freeing the Kurdish Question from Violence." The 114-page report was recognized at the time as the most comprehensive report to date, and it remains so. It was written at a period when hopes for a peaceful resolution of Turkey's Kurdish question were high. The Arab Spring, disseminating optimism for a promising future for the troubled region of the Middle East, had just blossomed, including in Syria where turmoil had just begun, raising expectations for benign change for all the deprived segments of its population, and above all the Kurds.

The task was to provide a workable blueprint to the decision-makers for the resolution of Turkey's decades-old Kurdish question by disavowing military means that had proved ineffective, thereby offering a way out of a seemingly intractable conflict without using means that further exacerbated it. The knowledge and awareness of peace talks between the belligerents, the Turkish state, and the insurgent organization the PKK waging an armed struggle against the former had inspired and guided this effort.

In the report's foreword dated June 2011, I wrote:

There is nothing that has not been said or written to date on the Kurdish Question and the ways to solve it. During the various readings I undertook for the preparation of this report and during the one-on-one interviews I conducted with tens of people extending from the Presidential Palace to the Qandil Mountain, I arrived at the same conclusion. As a person who has been living with the Kurdish Question for the last forty years, it was a reinforced confirmation of a conclusion I had drawn so many times before. Therefore, this report does not reinvent the wheel when it comes to the resolution of the Kurdish Question. . . . The historical period ahead of us gives ample opportunities for removing violence from the Kurdish Question.⁴

If the report were to be reprinted, I would refrain from keeping the preface of 2011 as it was written. The report deserves a whole new introduction. The wheel, it seems, needs to be reinvented for the resolution of the Kurdish question. The historical period in which we found ourselves in the second

half of the 2010s greeted us with more ambiguities than opportunities to end the violence related to the Kurdish question. The experience taught me to be more prudent in reaching hasty conclusions and making generalizations in writing history.

IV

It was early October in 2012, in İstanbul. When we met after not having seen each other for more than two years, Barham Salih, an old friend with whom I had labored to promote good and close relations between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds, opened his arms wide and approached to hug me, shouting jovially in English, “Cengiz, the Kurdish moment has arrived!” Barham, who would become the president of Iraq six years later, with a beaming face spoke as the harbinger of a long-awaited outcome. From the Gulf War in 1991 on, thanks mainly to the developments in Iraq, Kurds had managed to establish self-rule in the northern part of the country, and in the wake of the controversial War on Iraq waged by a US-led international coalition and the eventual removal of the Arab nationalist totalitarian regime of Saddam Hussein, they had established a quasi-independent state. Their influence had extended to the center of power, to Baghdad, where the portfolio of presidency of post-Saddam Iraq was reserved for them. The epic Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani filled the post for the first time from 2006 to 2014, to be taken over by one of his aides, Fouad Masum, and later his disciple Barham Salih in October 2018.

I generally shared the optimism manifested by Barham in the fall of 2012. In numerous conferences, symposiums, and panels in which I took part in Turkey, the Middle East, Europe, and the United States, my recurrent theme was: “Unlike the aftermath of the World War I, when the map of the Middle East was drawn following the demise of the Ottoman Empire that had ruled the region for 400 years, the Kurds have stepped into history. They are on the stage of history now and it is impossible to roll it back.”

It was not only the developments in Iraq where Kurds gained a high profile and acquired almost independent state status that inspired such an argument. In Turkey, where half of the entire Kurdish national community reside, with a decades-old insurgency and violent manifestation of the issue, hopes for a peaceful resolution had emerged thanks to peace initiatives that had been launched. Although intermittent, those processes unleashed new dynamics that broke many taboos in the cultural and societal realm that were believed to be untouchable and eternal. In Syria, a proxy war of global and regional powers and an ugly civil war that devastated and fragmented the country nevertheless brought to the fore the country’s Kurds, who until 2014 were the most forgotten and ostensibly the most insignificant segment of the entire

Kurdish people. Syrian Kurds were able to establish control of more than a third of Syria, encompassing all the oil-producing regions. More importantly, they proved to be the most reliable and efficient partners of American-led international coalition on the battlefield in the fight against the Islamic State (*Daesh*), to the dismay of Turkey. There were adequate reasons and indicators to rewrite the history of the post-Cold War period, with Kurds occupying a central place and promising fortunes on the stage of the Middle East.

However, in 2015 and especially after 2016 and 2017, more prudence and sobriety were required in analyzing and forecasting the prospects for the Kurds. The slippery ground on which the history of the Middle East operates has countless times illustrated that tables can rapidly be turned against the Kurds. The end in July 2015 of Turkey's peace process, which had generated earnest hopes for a political settlement, postponed the chances for resolution of the Kurdish conflict indefinitely, and perhaps forever. The aspirations for a political settlement were replaced by a zero-sum game that became the modus operandi of the Turkish regime, which drifted from an imperfect democracy into a full-fledged autocracy under the most powerful leader Turkey has had in almost a century. Turkey moved into the Syrian quagmire in 2016, not in cooperation with its NATO ally the United States, but as a partner of Russia, a rival of the US, and in conjunction with a trilateral partnership that included Iran, to confront the Kurds of Syria, at the cost of reversing the gains the Kurds had made since 2012. In 2017, the independence bid of the president of the KRG, Masoud Barzani, drew the ire of Turkey with which it had developed an extremely cordial relationship since 2009, and also of Iran. The latter coordinated with and supported the Shiite-dominated Baghdad government to overrun Kirkuk, the disputed city in Iraq over which the Kurds claim ownership and which they need to form the basis of their ultimate independent state to cede from Iraq. Not only Kirkuk but all the territorial gains of the KRG on the "Disputed Territories" were lost overnight. The divisions among the Iraqi Kurds helped the armies and paramilitary forces of Baghdad, supported by Iran, who easily defeated the Kurdish peshmerga. Turkey established a military presence inside the Iraqi Kurdistan as well, and the Turkish air force undertook a permanent action against the bases and redoubts of the Kurdish insurgents of Turkey in that region.

In January 2018, Turkish armed forces entered the northwestern Syrian Kurdish region and dismantled the Kurdish rule that had been in force for more than five years. A year later, Turkey declared its resolution to terminate the Kurdish rule, stretching along the frontier with Turkey, in northeastern Syria east of the Euphrates. On October 9, 2019, the fateful war of Turkey against the Syrian Kurds was launched. Turkish Army with its Syrian proxies comprising mostly Salafi thugs attacked the predominantly Kurdish Autonomous Administration in northeastern Syria. American military

personnel abandoned the region abiding by the decision of President Donald Trump. The developments reverberated across the world as the Kurdish question acquired a global dimension. Russia replaced the United States, and emerged as the new kingmaker in Syria. Thus, the intertwined nature of Turkish and Syrian Kurdish issues had drawn Turkey into the Syrian quagmire with the potential to seal its destiny during the unprecedented historical period of transition of the Middle East in the post-Cold War international and regional order.

Following the developments across the region, I began to be overcautious in prognosticating the prospects for the Kurds. I told my Kurdish friends, some of whom are well-known names in international society, that although facile comparisons are too risky to be accurate, the analogy of the developments of the last years of the Ottoman Empire during World War I might provide an unpleasant but a useful compass to navigate the present and in the future.

The developments following the collapse of the peace process in the summer of 2015 also spelled an incontrovertible departure of Turkey from its fledgling democracy to a nationalist authoritarianism, reminiscent of the final decade of the defunct Ottoman Empire.

The prospect of eternal peace and stability in the Middle East and in Turkey looked increasingly evasive. Fears of new bloodshed, deportation, displacement of populations, and aggravated human agony and misery were rekindled. At this crossroads of history, I was interested in writing a book about why Turkey's Kurdish peace processes failed, what went wrong, and what can be done to avoid the mistakes of the past and make the peace initiatives of the future more successful. My research thus initially focused on the failures of the Kurdish peace process.

V

The richest experience concerning the Kurdish issue, and one that must occupy a very distinct place in the historical record, took place in the following years, from 2011 to 2015 and from 2015 to 2018. The year 2011 witnessed the violent collapse of the most significant enterprise for the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish insurgency in Turkey. That phase was marked by secret talks that took place mostly in Oslo, Norway. Any research on these talks leads to the information that they were held between the intelligence officials of Turkey and the PKK delegation, half of whom had come all the way from the organization's redoubt in Mt. Qandil on the inaccessible frontier zone between Iraq and Iran, therefore suggesting a third-party and international involvement. The PKK's uncontested leader Abdullah Öcalan,

who is serving life imprisonment on a prison-island in the Marmara Sea near İstanbul, indirectly participated in the endeavor. The talks in Oslo continued from 2008 to 2011 following a preparatory phase that goes back to 2006.

This most crucial period pertinent to reconciliation between Turkey and the Kurds has not sufficiently been scrutinized and therefore has not taken its deserved place in the annals of history. This is why it was a personal obligation for me to address the issue comprehensively in *Turkey's Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds*.

In the aftermath of July 2011, an interlude marked by the eruption of violence between Turkish and Kurdish belligerents, the peace process was established once again in the last days of the year 2012. Unlike the Oslo talks or perhaps more accurately the previous process that extended from 2006 to 2011, this process was homegrown and coincided with momentous developments in the Syrian conflict that saw effective establishment of control by the PKK's Syrian Kurdish affiliates on the other side of Turkey's longest frontier. The second peace process, as it should be correctly termed, as well as being homegrown, was unprecedented, being centered on negotiations with the PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan on his prison-island. The quadripartite effort involved Öcalan; the PKK's political-military leadership in their Mt. Qandil redoubt in Iraqi territory; members of parliament from the pro-Kurdish party BDP (Peace and Democracy Party, banned by verdict of the Constitutional Court in 2012) and then from the HDP (Halkların Demokratik Partisi—Peoples' Democratic Party which succeeded the banned BDP); and the Turkish government. In contrast with the previous process that was secretly run, this one was relatively transparent. It continued under the careful public eye, and was observed and reported extensively by the then relatively free Turkish media. More importantly, it aroused hopes for the ultimate resolution of the Kurdish question, "the mother of all the questions" of the Republic of Turkey, which was founded in the 1920s over the debris of the Ottoman Empire. The two dominant leaders, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey's prime minister who later became the first president, elected by popular vote in 2014, and Abdullah Öcalan, around whom millions of primarily Turkish and Syrian Kurds formed a cult of personality, made statements on their firm commitment to its success. No initiative in the Republican Turkish and therefore Kurdish history had kindled expectations as strongly as the peace process that ended in July 2015.

The developments related to the Kurdish issue following the year 2015 illustrated that scrutiny on the causes of the failure of the peace processes could and should not be taken in isolation. Any analysis disregarding the regional and international developments would be unforgivably flawed.

Thus, the scope of the book expanded from being merely a study on the failure of peace processes into an analysis of the issue in its entirety, with its past, present, and future.

VI

Working on *Turkey's Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds* raised some fundamental questions, the most important of which was the methodology to be used in taking up the subject. I grappled with specific theoretical questions. The paradoxical issue of simultaneous subjectivity and objectivity came to the fore, as I have been an active participant in the story that I would narrate and analyze in the book. It could not be written in the format that a non-committed and uninvolved scholar would employ in revealing the results of his research conducted in libraries and archives.

There are no universal norms and even generally accepted principles on the issue of objectivity and subjectivity in the writing of history. There was a legitimate question I asked from the very beginning: Why would having a role in the resolution of the Kurdish question cast a shadow of subjectivity on my assessments, more so than a respected armchair scholar working only from alleged primary sources? My personal experience during many twists and turns of the Kurdish conflict has been the primary source for this research per se. The value of these experiences as direct testimonies to historical junctures and their first-told narratives can, I believe, easily contest the supposedly objective, yet a distant take of an academic bystander who writes in the comforts of education institutions and misses many details that make the history what it is. The latter would be an easier and more comfortable choice for me yet would lack the excitement of onsite discovery and firsthand experience.

The other theoretical issues that preoccupied me in the writing of the book were concepts of historiography like causation and chance, the role of the individual, free will and determinism, and whether history runs through laws that lead us to inevitability. Is there anything like historical inevitability? The responses to these questions, naturally, would frame the subject matter of the book and eventually its conclusions. These were serious questions, most of which E. H. Carr had discussed in his immortal classic, *What Is History?*

Contemplating the role of chance in history, I queried: If, as a Turk, I had not involved myself in the most existential question of Turkey with a perceived and staunch pro-Kurdish stance that put me always in trouble with the security establishment of my country and produced threats on my life, how different would the trajectory of my career have been? As an orthodox researcher and academic scholar, I would still choose to work on the Kurdish conflict but with a fundamentally different life than I have had. Would that make me more objective and more scholarly, or more subjective really? The logical follow-up to this question was just another one: If I had not played an intermediary role between Turgut Özal and Jalal Talabani (later including Masoud Barzani as well), which broke what had been a taboo since the

1920s, would the trajectory of the events between Turkey and Kurds have been? If I had not known Talabani in 1973 in Beirut and despite the irreconcilable differences in our upbringing and ideological backgrounds, besides the generational difference, if I had not taken the unexpected pro-Özal position in the overwhelmingly hostile Turkish mainstream media in 1990, would I have been able to play the role I played? Supposedly, the principle of causality in historiography and the element of chance or coincidence cannot survive.

I tried to surmount the paradox—not to solve the problems—by bringing my anecdotal experience into *Turkey's Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds*. As I argued earlier, these experiences are my primary sources. I thought this was compatible with what the founder of modern source-based history, Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), would demand. Ranke, in E. H. Carr's description, is a "talisman for empirical historians" and a titan of historiography who left a powerful mark on history writing in the nineteenth century. For Ranke, the task of the historian was to study, research and then to show "how it really was"⁵ or as he phrased it in German, "*wie es eigentlich gewesen*." He did not believe in the philosophy of history as Hegel did, or in general theories that cut across time and space. In his historiography, he used quotations from primary sources.

For me, my anecdotal contributions in the book were somewhat like taking refuge in Ranke's gargantuan authority. I knew that Ranke's dictum "*wie es eigentlich gewesen*" had attracted extensive criticism from the great historians of the twentieth century whom I also admired, notably E. H. Carr and Fernand Braudel (1902–1985), the great French historian and leader of the Annales School in historiography. They both challenged Ranke. Carr opposed Ranke's ideas of empiricism as outmoded, and underlined that historians did not merely report facts, they chose which facts they used. Facts and documents are essential to the historian, but they do not by themselves constitute history, according to Carr. The historian's selection of the facts makes what history is. He argued brilliantly that Caesar's crossing of that petty stream, the Rubicon, is a fact of history, whereas the crossing of Rubicon by millions of other people before or after Caesar interests nobody at all, and wrote, "The historian is necessarily selective. The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy."⁶

Benedetto Croce (1866–1952), the renowned Italian historian, philosopher, and political activist, carried that understanding to new horizons. For Croce, "All history is contemporary history, because history consists essentially in seeing the past through the eyes of the present. . . . The main work of the historian is not to record, but to evaluate; for, if he does not evaluate, how can he know what is worth recording."⁷

The element of subjectivity, therefore, is not only unavoidable for writing history, but is an inherent condition of it. Carr's friend but at the same time his fierce critic, Sir Isaiah Berlin, influenced by the experience of the Holocaust and the totalitarian practices of Nazi Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union, in his famous essay "Historical Inevitability" brings up the argument that "human beings are unique by their capacity of moral choice" and accords "moral responsibility to the historian" in history writing. Thus, Berlin carried the element of subjectivity to further horizons: "There is always a subjective element in historical writing, for historians are individuals, people of their time, with views and assumptions about the world that they cannot eliminate from their writing and research, even if they can hope to restrain it."⁸ This observation was entirely valid in the writing process of *Turkey's Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds*.

Delving into the passionate debate among the great historians presiding over more than a hundred years to dig out the methodology for *Turkey's Mission Impossible* has not only been an amusing and thought-provoking exercise but also a constructive one. The research taught me that until recently, alongside many from my generation in Turkey, I have been guided by a primitive understanding of Hegelian determinism and Marxian materialism in looking at history, tropes that have injected a linear directionality into our view of history. History was seen through the lens of an inevitable progress toward our ideologically preferred objectives. Of course, to neither Hegel nor Marx can be attributed the responsibility for this, but in writing *Turkey's Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds*, I consciously refrained from adopting historical determinism as the sole tool of my analysis. Instead, I wanted to make use of all the available tools in the rich arsenal of historiography, in an eclectic manner. If "how it was" and "what really happened" had precedence in Ranke's historiography, it was "why" for Carr. In my ambitious project, I wanted to reconcile Ranke's empiricism that empowered my anecdotal notes as primary sources with the relativism of historians like Carr, who construct history with the foundation of their selectively arranged and organized "facts."

Perhaps I should add that I do not embrace the doctrine which stipulates that there are invisible laws that govern the flow of history. There, indeed, are dynamics to explain specific historical developments and of overall history itself—that is to say, generalizations—but they cannot be put forward as laws that govern it.

The belief in laws of history has more to do with the historians of the nineteenth century who tried to consider the discipline of history as a *science*, during a period when it was widely believed that nature was guided by laws beyond the control of human beings. Karl Marx contributed to this understanding by presenting his propositions as *scientific socialism* which in

its turn influenced generations of people all over the world. The underdogs in many lands took refuge in the belief that the injustices they faced and the plight they lived through would come to an end with the inevitable triumph they would ultimately enjoy as the laws of history took effect. For me, as even the Law of Gravity established by Newton (1642–1727) lost its significance as “law” upon the emergence of the Theory of Relativity proposed by Einstein (1879–1955), and since we are living in *Liquid Times in the Age of Uncertainty* as Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017) describes, I do not believe in governing laws and inevitability of history.

VII

Another major question with which I also had to grapple was the role of the individual: how, for instance, in terms of the subject matter of the book, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Abdullah Öcalan occupied the places that they did, in both quantitative and qualitative senses. Besides the political controversy regarding those names that erects a formidable challenge in front of the historian or writer, the issue itself, above all, is a philosophical one: the role of the individual in history.

For one of the greatest writers of all time, Lev Tolstoy (1828–1910), individuals play an insignificant role in history. In a draft of the epilogue to his immortal *War and Peace*, he had stated, “Historical personages are the products of their time, emerging from the connection between contemporary and preceding events.”⁹ One can find a strong Marxist connotation in this statement; whereas the Oxford historian, one-time member of the Communist Party of Great Britain and of the Labour Party from 1926 until his death, A. J. P. Taylor (1906–90) asserted in his 1950 book *From Napoleon to Stalin* that “the history of modern Europe can be written in terms of three titans: Napoleon, Bismarck and Lenin.”¹⁰

The research period for *Turkey’s Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds* coincided with momentous developments that have been effective in changing the course of history, such as the regime change in Turkey that placed the country, ostensibly, under the one-man rule of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. So, in terms of historiography, I have felt closer to Taylor than to the great Tolstoy. For me writing the history of the last 150 years of Turkey in terms of Sultan Abdülhamit II (1842–1918), M. Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, three autocrats who each in their own right can accurately be described as a titan, would help us better understand that period of Turkish history in all its richness and vicissitudes. Turkey’s drift from an illiberal democracy to the one-man rule of Erdoğan affected the frame and the content of *Turkey’s Mission Impossible* because

of its impact on the destiny of the Kurdish conflict. Just as Turkey's most protracted Kurdish insurgency, initiated by the PKK, cannot be analyzed and narrated without specific reference to its founding leader, Abdullah Öcalan, the change in Turkey that reached far beyond this country and left its mark on a global scale cannot be understood without reserving a special place for Erdoğan alongside M. Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey, and Abdülhamit II, the legendary Ottoman Sultan.

With a nod to the everlasting historiography debate, chronicling the rupture and continuity in Ottoman-Turkish history necessitates the inclusion of these three larger-than-life political names, Abdülhamit II, Atatürk, and Erdoğan. While the narration of history and its crucial episodes certainly features its outstanding individuals, however, I kept as my permanent reference point E. H. Carr's cogent argument:

What distinguishes the historian is the proposition that one thing led to another. Secondly, while historical events were of course set in motion by the individual wills, whether of "great men" or of ordinary people, the historian must go behind the individual wills and inquire into the reasons which made the individuals will and act as they did, and study the "factors" or "forces" which explain individual behavior. Thirdly, while history never repeats itself, it presents certain regularities, and permits of certain generalizations, which can serve as a guide to future action.¹¹

Moreover, the *sine qua non* of historiography, "historians should try to rise above their personal prejudices when writing history," accompanied me throughout *Turkey's Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds*. I consciously observed this principle, and therefore I am reasonably confident that *objectivity* (but not neutrality) in that respect has been achieved in this work.

VIII

I was also lucky to call on the help of some extraordinary historians, my contemporaries, who supplied me with invaluable assistance in terms of information, angle, argument, and empirical data. The leading two names in this respect are, interestingly enough, historians whom I have never met or communicated with. Their books and works, some in long article format, played a tremendously important role in the writing of this book. The Dutch historian Erik J. Zürcher and the American historian Ryan Gingeras have been with me from the very first days of the research period, without knowing it at all.

I have never sympathized with official historiography irrespective of the country it is dedicated to. The so-called historians in the service of the official ideology, for me, are propagandists, not historians. I have always sympathized with, been interested in, and been impressed by what is called, depending on the location, context, or period, the *revisionist* or *new* historians. The unorthodoxy that they harbor in their essays and books, the creative thinking that they reveal, the challenging new approaches that they bring to the history of a specific country and period have always been thought-provoking for me besides opening up new horizons and filling my treasury of knowledge with invaluable facts that they provide. Regarding the late Ottoman and early Republican Turkish history, Erik J. Zürcher and Ryan Gingeras excel among all the others of no less importance, to whom I also owe much. In 2018, Swiss historian Hans-Lukas Kieser, with his work entitled *Talaat Pasha Father of Modern Turkey, Architect of Armenian Genocide*, and the revolutionary historiography that he proposes, stepped into the pantheon of historians who have helped me to understand what happened, and why it happened in the way it did, in Turkey in the last 100–150 years. I benefited immensely from reading his revolutionary book and found confirmation for some postulates of mine for interpreting the modern history of Turkey. The closing chapters of Kieser's book are devoted to the controversial issues of the "Deep State," "New Turkey," and the prospects for Turkey's future, and therefore the Kurdish issue. With their unique and robust arguments relying on valuable empirical data, Zürcher and Gingeras equipped me for *Turkey's Mission Impossible* with concepts essential for my hypothesis on the configuration of power in the "New Turkey."

The spirit of unorthodoxy that I treasure in history writing, along with the strong encouragement garnered from the *oeuvres* of Erik J. Zürcher, Ryan Gingeras, and many others, has inevitably made its mark on *Turkey's Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds*. That was what I cherished in writing the book.

IX

The Herculean challenge confronting me has been how to achieve a time-resistant book, which would remain valid as a source of reference in a rapidly and permanently changing world, especially regarding the fluid political circumstances and constantly shifting sands of the Middle East. Unlike in previous decades, the world and above all, the region of the Middle East seem to have entered into an age of uncertainty. When I was close to completion of writing the book, a young Swedish diplomat who had spent some of his career in Turkey and knew about my mission asked me how I saw the possibilities

for settlement of the Kurdish conflict in the near future, and whether the book would have a happy ending.

I reminded him that the book discusses a number of questions: What is the true nature of the Kurdish question? Is it intractable? What went wrong in the peace processes that continued for almost a decade and ended with failure producing devastation and tragic consequences in the world's most volatile geopolitics? Can Turkey survive the Syrian conflict? Will the aspiration of Kurdish independence come true or remain a pipe dream? What will the future Middle East look like in comparison to the Sykes-Picot order of post-World War I or the seventeenth-century Westphalian order in Europe that followed the Thirty Years' War? It has certainly been my aim to investigate likely answers to these questions. Yet, I recognized that we were passing through a period characterized above all by uncertainty. Consequently, *Turkey's Mission Impossible* does not offer any facile or happy ending. Alongside its ambitious aims, it humbly acknowledges the peculiarities of this unprecedented, unique episode of history: the period of uncertainty.

NOTES

1. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin Classics, 2002), 2.
2. Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times* (London: Abacus, 2003), xiii.
3. E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (London: Penguin Classics, 2018), ix, x.
4. Cengiz Çandar, *Leaving the Mountain: How May the PKK Lay Down Arms? Freeing the Kurdish Question from Violence* (İstanbul: Tesev Yayınları, 2011).
5. Carr, *What is History?*, *ibid.*, 5.
6. *Ibid.*, 8.
7. *Ibid.*, 17.
8. *Ibid.*, xvii.
9. *Ibid.*, lxxv
10. *Ibid.*, 48.
11. *Ibid.*, xviii.

Part I

INTRACTABLE CONFLICT

Chapter 1

Historical and Ideological Background

Turkey has the distinction of being the only country that has denied the existence of the Kurds for decades—although it is home to one of every two Kurds in the world. Turkish official denial of the existence of a distinct Kurdish identity goes back to the foundational period of the republic in the aftermath of World War I and the demise of the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman Turkey, the predecessor of the Republic of Turkey, as an empire was thus in essence a multi-national and multi-ethnic entity. Its successor state was constructed on those former territories of the Ottoman state that could be salvaged from partitioning by the victors of the World War, primarily Britain and France, or from acquisition by the allies of those victors. It was designed to be a Turkish nation-state.

The “New Turkey” of the 1920s that replaced Ottoman Turkey was the logical outcome of a formative phase, the years of the Balkan War (1911–1912), World War I (1914–1918), and the war for national independence (1919–1922) where Muslim nationalism had predominance as an ideology. Creation of a Turkish national state could be achieved by demographically de-Christianizing Asia Minor to be inhabited as a refuge for Ottoman Muslims, and as a cradle for a modern state where the upper identity would be Turkish, a notion used synonymously for Muslim. The disparate Muslim subjects of the former Ottoman state would be galvanized into the Turkish identity irrespective of their ethnic background.

TURKISH SOCIAL DARWINISM

In his revolutionary historiography, Swiss historian of late Ottoman history and the history of Turkey, Hans-Lukas Kieser, depicted Talaat Pasha,

strongman of the ruling Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) of the Ottoman Empire during the World War I years, as the “Father of Modern Turkey” along with his infamous reputation as the architect of the Armenian genocide. Kieser underlined that Social Darwinism had been applied, albeit differently, to the Kurds, as well as the Ottoman Christians:

Talaat and his close political friends had inscribed mass crime into their project of an imperially connotated new Turkish nation building, the result of which were very distant, viable futures for Asia Minor. Talaat’s comprehensive effort at new nation building was, first, demolition and spoliation. This included not only mass removal, demographic engineering, and comprehensive looting but also starvation and systematic mass killing. . . . With the purpose of achieving an exclusive Turkish-Muslim unity in Asia Minor, Talaat’s policy ‘replaced’ the removed Christian population with Muslim migrants. Moreover, Talaat sought to ‘dilute’ non-Turkish identities of Muslim groups and considered these groups fit for assimilation into the new nation of a “New Turkey,” in contrast to Ottoman Christians.

Talaat’s demolitionist domestic policy had started as a consequence of the Balkan Wars, and from spring 1914 the Rûm¹ presence on the Aegean coast was erased. His policy reached an unprecedented extent with the Armenians in April 1915 by embracing its most ambitious and comprehensive scheme of erasure and demographic change. Talaat also engaged in the large-scale removal of Kurds from parts of the eastern provinces in 1916, because to him many Kurds appeared as unreliable elements. It was a prime moment for him to exploit the fact that thousands of Kurds had fled before the advancing Russian army. . . . Talaat defined his policy.

He forbade sending Kurdish refugees from the war zones to southern regions “because they would either Arabize or preserve their nationality there and remain a useless and harmful element.” To be useful and acceptable elements of the new nation, Kurds, therefore, had to first lose their nationality (*milliyet*) and then be prevented from adopting others, like Arab or Armenian identities. . . . Jacob Künzler, a Swiss medical missionary in Urfa and a rare foreign observer and reporter of the Kurdish removal, organized help for tens of thousands of Kurds who starved near Urfa in 1916. . . . “The intention of the Young Turks was to keep these Kurdish elements from returning to their ancestral homeland. They should slowly become assimilated into Turckdom in Inner Anatolia,” Künzler wrote. “In spite of a good harvest that year, almost all of the deported Kurds were victims of the famine.”

Kurdish mass deaths of 1916–17 were to put mildly, the result of irresponsibility and negligence, but never of massacre. This distinguished them from the Armenians.²

TURKISHNESS: THE DRIVING FORCE FOR NATION-BUILDING

Kurds were exempted from the genocidal policies directed at Christian Armenians. They, although Muslims, were considered as *unreliable elements*, and were targeted for assimilation into Turckdom or Turkishness; this ultimately led to the denial of their distinct identity and language. The social and demographic engineering involved preceded the foundation of the Turkish nation-state in the early 1920s. The groundwork for this denial started during the rule of the CUP in the last years of the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the 1910s, while World War I was ongoing.

The Turkish sociologist Barış Ünlü proposed two concepts, “the Muslim Contract” and “the Turkishness Contract,” as tools for the analysis of the history of Turkey of the past hundred years. The Muslim Contract, which he used to describe the social engineering performed by the powerholders of the Ottoman state in the wake of the Balkan Wars (1911–1912) and by the founders of the Turkish nation-state in 1923 following the national struggle, was a gateway to the subsequent Turkishness Contract that suppressed and effectively denied the Kurdish identity. He argued that his concept of the Turkishness Contract has “three fundamental articles.” The first of these is that to live privileged and secure in Turkey, to have upward mobility or at least the potential for it, being Muslim and Turk are primary requirements. The second article is the absolute ban on showing solidarity with or engaging in political activity favoring the Ottoman and Turkey’s non-Muslims, and on speaking the truth about what has been done to them (deportation, massacre, genocide, confiscation, racism, discrimination, etc.) The third article concerns the Muslim groups, and especially the Kurds who have resisted Turkification decisively and firmly. To speak the truth on what has been done to them, to be involved in pro-Kurdish political action, and to show empathy and to establish emotional solidarity with them are strictly forbidden.³

Being Muslim was the first gate that opened to the Turkishness Contract; if the person was a Muslim, she/he could pass to Turkishness. This distinguishes the situation of non-Turkish Muslims more than those citizens of Turkey who are not Muslims. Because Turkishness is equipped with material and moral rewards and not being so is identified with material and moral punishments, millions of Muslims who are originally non-Turkish passed into Muslim Turkishness and espoused the assimilationist policy of the state; they were assimilated. In other words, millions of Muslims abandoned being Kurdish, Arab, Circassian, Pomak, Georgian, Laz, Albanian, Bosnian. In retrospect, that abandoning may not be understood well, because generations have passed since the first generation [that

abandoned its original identity to be Turkish]. The identity abandoned has been left behind, no longer exists, and indeed has been obliged to be forgotten. There is no memory to remember or to know what has been left behind. Looked back, the transition may be seen as if it has always been there, a natural and a normal phenomenon. But, for the first generation that made the transition it was probably an arduous process that required an intense and conscious endeavor. The dual nature of the process was an element that made it even more difficult: To abandon what you are and to be able to learn who you will be.⁴

“Turkishness” as the driving force in the nation-building and state-crafting following the national struggle (1919–1922) under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) followed an evolutionary course. This was already embedded in the Unionist *weltanschauung* during the years of World War I, in the wake of the Balkan Wars where the Ottoman Empire had lost its geopolitical heartland. Its evolution signified the transition from the Society of Union and Progress, the ruling party of the late Ottoman period, to the People’s Party (later the Republican People’s Party) of Mustafa Kemal, which largely carried the legacy of the former. It also manifested the continuity between the two organisms and the two sequential historical periods.

Erik J. Zürcher, the Dutch scholar who is the most authoritative and indisputable expert on the Young Turks, the last period of the Ottoman Empire under the rule of the Union and Progress (*İttihad ve Terakki*), and the formative years of the new Turkish republic, has explicated the evolution of the inferred “Turkishness”:

On the issue of national identity, a radical choice was also made. Ottomanism obviously no longer was an option. But the Muslim nationalism which had been championed from 1912–1922 was now also abandoned the new republic was made, based on the idea of a “Turkish” nation . . . a romantic idealization of the Turkish national character, with racist elements. . . . Turkish nationalism led to the forced assimilation of the 30 per cent or so of the population which did not have Turkish as its mother tongue.⁵

As early as 1923 laws, government proclamations, and the programs of the People’s Party (the founding political vehicle of modern Turkey, led by Mustafa Kemal) ceased to speak of “Muslims” or “Kurds” and “Turks.” The third article of its 1923 statute states: “Every Turk or every outsider who accepts Turkish nationality and culture can join the People’s Party.”⁶ Two years later, on December 8, 1925, the Ministry of Education announced in a proclamation on “currents trying to undermine Turkish unity” that use of the terms “Kürt,” “Çerkez,” and “Kürdistan” (Kurd, Circassian, Kurdistan), as well as “Laz” and “Lazistan,” would be banned.⁷ In 1931, “Turk” was

defined: “Any individual within the Republic of Turkey, whatever his faith, who speaks Turkish, grows up with Turkish culture and adopts the Turkish ideal, is a Turk.”⁸

The renowned historian Erik J. Zürcher, using those reference points, concluded the unique characteristic of Turkish nationalism as the foundational ideological pillar of the new Turkish state in the following passage:

The Kemalist concept of nationality was thus firmly based on language, culture, and common purpose (“ideal”).⁹

THE ROOTS OF THE KURDISH QUESTION

The Kurdish question therefore, in the allegoric sense, is the outcome of those Kurds who refused to sign the “Turkishness Contract” or could not be accommodated in it. In other words, those segments of the Kurdish population that the Turkish state was unable to assimilate, or those who resisted and, going even further, revolted against the denial of their identity in consecutive uprisings.

In a country where one of two Kurds in the world reside, the ban on the usage of the terms Kurd and Kurdistan and the subsequent persecution and suppression of those who resist the ban, has placed Turkey in a unique position. Among the four countries in the Middle East where Kurds form a significant component of the population, Turkey is the only one in which the word Kurdistan is taboo. In Iran, despite the restriction of fundamental rights for the Kurds, there has always been a province named Kurdistan; in Iraq neither the term “Kurdistan” nor “Kurd” as an ethnic identity with distinct linguistic and even administrative rights has ever been banned or denied; and in Syria, the usage of those terms never has been a matter for persecution.

Despite the absence of official and reliable statistics on the Kurds where they live in the Middle East, there are estimates based on population statistics and various other data. Accordingly it is estimated that, in the year 2016, 12.2 million Kurds inhabited an area of about 230,000 square kilometers in the southeastern and eastern parts of Turkey that the Kurds call Northern Kurdistan. The Kurds comprise 86 percent of this area’s inhabitants. The Turkish citizens of Kurdish descent who inhabit the Turkish-majority regions in Turkey and those in the European diaspora are estimated to number between 7 and 10 million. Turkey’s megapolis, the former imperial capital İstanbul having more than 3 million Kurds, is sarcastically considered the largest Kurdish city in the world. The Kurds of Turkey are thus estimated to number at least 15 million, ranging to 20 million. The most modest estimate indicates them as making up around 20 percent or one-fifth of Turkey’s

population. The probable ratio, though, is 25 percent; that is, one-quarter of the citizens of Turkey are Kurdish.

The minimum estimate for the total number of Kurds worldwide is 36.4 million, while the figure could climb to 45.6 million. In both cases, the Kurds of Turkey constitute half of the total Kurdish population of the world.¹⁰

In Turkey, the rejection of the terms “Kurdistan,” “Kurd,” and “Kurdish” continued almost to the end of the twentieth century, and the persecution, albeit at different levels, did not cease even in the first decades of the twenty-first. A *de facto* ban on the term “Kurdistan” is a permanent phenomenon. Apart from the effective avoidance of these terms for Turkey’s southeast and eastern regions—even solely with a geographic connotation in a historical context—Turkey’s rulers refrained from addressing by its official name its immediate neighbor, the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq, notwithstanding their close personal ties with its leadership and the fact of Turkey’s being its major economic partner.

THE SÈVRES TREATY

In addition to the ideological background of Turkey’s ruling elite based upon the foundational principles of the republic, Turkish nationalism, which obstructs Kurdish national aspirations even at a minimum, the ill-fated Treaty of Sèvres signed on August 10, 1920, with its perpetual traumatic effect on the Turkish psyche, also had a tremendously important influence on Turkey’s denial of Kurdish identity and its repressive demeanor *vis-à-vis* the Kurds, even those beyond Turkey’s frontiers.

The Treaty of Sèvres was among the treaties that the losing parties of World War I were made to sign, yet it was also the only one that was not ratified and thus not implemented and ultimately nullified. It is replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne (July 24, 1923), which is regarded as the international legal basis for the foundation of the Republic of Turkey. The Treaty of Lausanne made no mention of Kurdistan or the Kurds. With it, the opportunity to unify the Kurds in a nation of their own was lost altogether, turning Turkey into a negation of the idea of the independent Kurdistan. Indeed, Kurdistan after World War I was more fragmented than before, and this became the root cause for the rise of separatist movements among the Kurds scattered in various countries of the Middle East.

Veritably, the Kurdish question in Turkey and in the region has deep roots structured in the post-World War I order of the Middle East, an order that survived almost a century. There are thus structural reasons that have led to its remaining unresolved, as well as the ideological shortcomings and restrictions of the Turkish government and lack of acumen among politicians.

Moreover, the Turkish psyche, scalped in the aftermath of the Ottoman collapse, proved to be decisive in the Turkish response to the perceived Kurdish challenge. Although the Sèvres Treaty became null and void, being replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne, in the eyes of the Turkish nationalists, it signified the Western objective of dismembering the territories of Turkey and marked the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire in the wake of World War I, a sequel to the notorious Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916), which was similarly never implemented in letter, but symbolized the unwarranted and unjust partitioning of the Middle East among Western colonial powers. Its terms spelled out the renunciation of all the non-Turkish territory, and its cession to the adversaries of the Ottoman state during the Great War. The treaty was signed when the Turkish national struggle was already underway, further stirring hostility and nationalist sentiments among Turks. Although the success of the Turkish national struggle prevented its implementation, its articles, those particularly relating to Kurdistan, were never removed from the Turkish subconscious. Even in the late 1990s and during the first two decades of the 2000s, confronted with Kurdish aspirations that sounded legitimate to many thanks to changing times, Turkish authorities invoked the memory of Sèvres.

The rankling memory of the treaty primarily relates to Articles 62 and 64. Article 62 stipulated:

A Commission sitting at Constantinople and composed of three members appointed by the British, French and Italian governments respectively shall draft within six months from the coming into force of the present Treaty a scheme of local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas lying east of the Euphrates, south of the southern boundary of Armenia as it may be hereafter determined, and north of the frontier of Turkey with Syria and Mesopotamia, as defined in Article 27, II. (2) and (3). . . . The scheme shall contain full safeguards for the protection of the Assyro-Chaldeans and other racial or religious minorities within these areas.¹¹

The wording of Article 64, referring to Article 62, provided the historical background from the perspective of international legality for a Kurdish independent state and thereby the ammunition for Kurdish nationalists in their bid for independence. It said:

If within one year from the coming into the force of the present Treaty the Kurdish peoples within the areas defined in Article 62 shall address themselves to the Council of League of Nations in such a manner as to show that a majority of the population of these areas desire independence from Turkey, and if the Council then considers that these peoples are capable of such independence and recommends that it should be granted to them, Turkey hereby agrees to execute such a recommendation, and to renounce all rights and title over these areas.

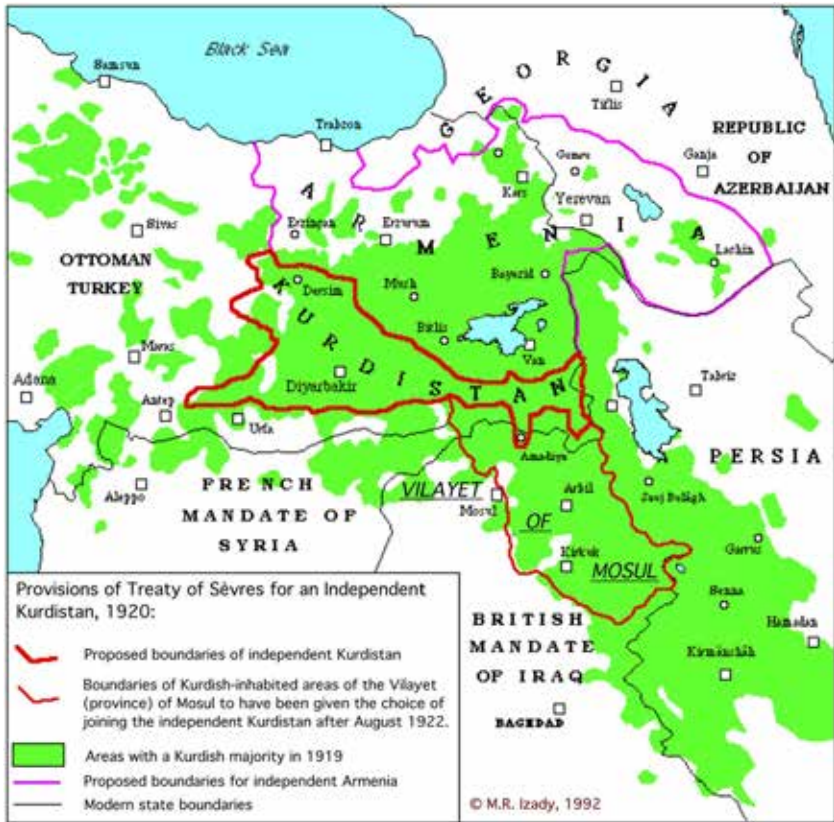


Figure 1.2 Map of Sèvres for an Independent Kurdistan (1920). Source: Mehrdad Izady.

The detailed provisions for such renunciation will form the subject of a separate agreement between the Principal Allied Powers and Turkey.

If and when such renunciation takes place, no objection will be raised by the Principal Allied Powers to the voluntary adhesion to such an independent Kurdish State of the Kurds inhabiting that part of Kurdistan which had been hitherto been included in the Mosul Vilayet.¹²

SÈVRES SYNDROME

Those articles of the ill-fated Treaty of Sèvres left a profound imprint, really a scar, in the Turkish political culture for generations to come. Trepidation, mainly on the part of Turkish ruling elites, about a possible dismemberment and breaking up of Turkey, territorially and socially, has become a permanent nightmare and instilled the concept of Sèvres Syndrome in the Turkish political lexicon. The reactions of Turkish authorities, particularly

during the 1990s, which witnessed the upsurge in the last Kurdish insurgency and violence coinciding with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the bloody break-up of Yugoslavia in the aftermath of the Cold War, revived the memories of Sèvres. It is widely interpreted that Sèvres Syndrome drove the resentment of the Turkish political class against Kurdish aspirations.

THE TRILOGY OF EVIL: SÈVRES, KURDS, WEST

The permanent effect of the Treaty of Sèvres did not confine itself only to worries of Turkey's dismemberment. Its wording and spirit turned the Western world into a suspicious entity in the eyes of Turkish authorities, in seeking the ultimate partitioning of Turkey by carving out an independent Kurdish state from its territory. Turkey's ruling elites believed that the Kurds would never be able to achieve any of their aims without the abetting of the Western powers and their endorsement of Kurdish independence. Turkey's anchoring in the Transatlantic Alliance, thus entering under the security umbrella of NATO in the early 1950s, may have alleviated its fears regarding its territorial integrity but its suspicions on the West's intentions concerning the Kurds never entirely died out. On the contrary, they revived from time to time to the extent that they created serious cleavages with Turkey's primary military and security partner, the United States, as witnessed in the Syrian debacle after the year 2014, having repercussions for the entirety of the international system and the collective security of the Western world.

The Treaty of Sèvres, with its reference to Turkey's renunciation of sovereign rights on the part of its territory where, if the Kurds enjoy local autonomy, they ultimately may desire independence and "voluntary adhesion to such an independent Kurdish State of the Kurds inhabiting that part of Kurdistan which had hitherto been included in the Mosul Vilayet," also established an unmistakable association between the Kurdish citizens of Turkey and those of Iraq. Thus, the Turkish political class has always been inimical to any Kurdish national activity whether it is within the boundaries of Turkey or not. In this regard, Sèvres played a tremendously important role in pitting Turkey as an adversary to all Kurds, irrespective of where they live. Sèvres bears a great deal of responsibility for Turkey's denial of the Kurdish identity within Turkey and its perception of the Kurds as a security problem outside its borders.

The content and spirit of the Sèvres Treaty molded Turkish political culture in such a way that any Kurdish demand in reference to ethnic or national rights was interpreted as a machination of foreign (mainly Western) powers seeking to dismember Turkey whose national struggle, in other words the national liberation war, made its achievement impossible. The connection between

foreign Western powers and the Kurdish element in the post-Ottoman Turkish entity born in Asia Minor is established as a matter of fact. The Kurds began to be seen as a potentially divisive element, one that is therefore ready to be manipulated by the foreign centers of power that brought the end of the preceding Ottoman state by carving up its territories. Any Kurdish activity with ethno-national underpinnings and administrative demands pertinent to self-rule is regarded as secessionism to be prevented, even in its embryonic stages.

TURKIFICATION: MAKING KURDS “MOUNTAIN TURKS”

The acceptance of a distinct Kurdish identity, from the exclusivity of their language (Kurdish) to the geographic name of the land that they inhabit (Kurdistan), would be contrary to Turkish nation-building in Anatolia (or Asia Minor). The denial of the Kurdish identity with all its components and the efforts to transform these people into “mountain Turks” should be understood within this context.

The leader of the military regime (1980–1983) and the president of Turkey (1983–1987), General Kenan Evren, in his speeches before the public frequently referred to the Kurds as “mountain Turks.” Naming of the Kurds as mountain Turks without a language, during the military regime which left a strong mark on the future decades of Turkey, not only became an ideological linchpin of the regime but also simultaneously constituted the gravest form of denial of Kurdish identity.

Notwithstanding the episode of military junta rule of the early 1980s, depicting Kurds as “mountain Turks” and thereby denying their distinct ethno-national identity has been the practice of Turkish governments ever since the foundation of the republic. In his book *A History of Turkey: From Empire to Republic* published in 1956, Morgan Philips Price (1885–1973), a British historian and a member of the Parliament from the Labour Party, summarizes the opinion of the Turkish government about the Kurds in the aftermath of the Sheikh Said revolt, the first major Kurdish rebellion of the Republican Turkey, in the following lines:

The revolt was suppressed. Several Kurdish aghas were hanged and whole tribes were deported to the interior of Anatolia, where they were surrounded by Turkish peasants, while the country they had left was recolonized by Turks. The nationalist Turks from this time on refused to recognize the Kurds as a separate people, in spite of the fact that everyone knows they have a language of their own. They are now called “mountain Turks,” and are given the same rights as any Turkish citizen but without any national privileges.¹³

The preposterous denial of Kurdish identity in Turkey has a history as a continuous phenomenon for a very long period. In the wake of suppression of the Sheikh Said revolt, in 1925, then the Prime Minister İsmet İnönü was very explicit on this matter: “We must Turkify the inhabitants of our land at any price, and we will annihilate those who oppose the Turks or ‘le Turquisme.’”¹⁴

Mahmut Esat Bozkurt, Minister of Justice of the Kemalist Turkey, reinforced this with his blunt statement recorded in 1930: “In the face of a Turkish majority other elements have no kind of influence. I believe that the Turk must be the only lord, the only master of this country. Those who are not of pure Turkish stock can have only one right in this country, the right to be servants and slaves.”¹⁵

The 1930s was the period that the Turkification process had been initiated in full steam in all walks of life. The Turkish Linguistic Society (*Türk Dil Kurumu*, TDK) was introduced and entrusted with the purification of the Turkish language from Arabic and Persian influence. To achieve this end, a “Sun-Language Theory” with racist undertones was developed. Simultaneously the Turkish History Society (*Türk Tarih Kurumu*, TTK) was founded, which in its turn focused on discovering the traces of the Turkish nation in pre-Islamic times—in Antiquity. The Turkish History Society claimed that the Sumerians of Mesopotamia and the Hittites who established a civilization in Anatolia were ethnic Turks. The ferocity in the wording of the young Turkey’s justice minister should be understood within the context of the 1930s. The period coincides with the rise of nationalism all over Europe, particularly in Germany under Nazism and in Italy under Mussolini’s Fascism.

The Turkification efforts of the 1930s produced dividends regarding the denial of distinct Kurdish culture and language, and fueling Turkish nationalism. In the 1960s, under a new set of prevailing circumstances, when the Kurds attempted to raise the “Eastern Question” without pronouncing the word “Kurdish,” the Turkish nationalist reaction was severe and menacing. *Ötüken*, the monthly mouthpiece of pan-Turanian ultra-nationalists, published articles by the influential poet and Turkish ultra-nationalist guru Nihal Atsız (1905–75) in its April and June 1967 issues. Atsız did not deny the Kurdish identity and the existence of the Kurds within Turkey. Unlike many Turkish nationalists who tended to deny a distinct identity for the Kurds and claimed they were originally ethnic Turks, Atsız declared that the Kurds, indubitably, were of Iranian origin, speaking a broken, primitive Farsi (Persian). Using venomous language he insulted the Kurds, and wrote that if they did not want to be assimilated in the Turkish nation, they could leave the country, with an implied threat of expulsion:

Yes. . . . If they resist and remain as Kurds, if they insist on speaking and making publications in their primitive language with four, five thousand words and founding a state [of their own], they can leave. We took these lands shedding blood, eradicating the roots of Georgians, Armenians and Greeks, and defended them against the Knights of the Crusaders. . . . From Vienna to Yemen while the blood of the Turkish race was rolling in, they, the Kurds, were herding their goats in the mountains and the villages they dwelt in, and whenever they have found the opportunity they lived by theft and pillaging that they have committed.¹⁶

He repeated the same theme two months later:

Let them [the Kurds] go off wherever they want, to Iran, to Pakistan, to India, or to join Barzani. Let them ask the United Nations to find them a homeland in Africa. The Turkish race is very patient, but when it gets angry, it is like a roaring lion, and nothing can stop it. Let them ask the Armenians, their racial kin, who we the Turks are so that they can come back to their senses. As easily understood, these lines are written against those traitors who want to divide Turkey and to establish an independent Kurdistan in our eastern provinces.¹⁷

Atsız may be considered an extreme example of Turkish nationalist expression vis-à-vis the Kurds, yet the terminology he employed and the overall approach he upheld illustrate the disdain that almost every shade of Turkish nationalism still has regarding the Kurds.

KURDISTAN: A TABOO FOR TURKEY, A STATE (EYALET) FOR THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

The denial—or the hatred as illustrated above—of the Kurdish identity and language inevitably resulted in the non-recognition of the Kurdish question. Even if implicitly, there has always been a quasi-consensus that the Kurdish question (with its corollary conflict) is the primary challenge to the survival of Turkey. Not acknowledging the question, treating it mainly as a security matter or downgrading it to a struggle against terrorism is tantamount to not undertaking a serious and real quest for its resolution. Ironically, it is also equivalent to aggravating the matter and transforming it to become gangrenous.

The passage of time, the changing circumstances, and the new dynamics of the post-Cold war period compelled Turkey, albeit reluctantly and gradually, to terminate its denial of Kurdish identity. However, fluctuations

in acknowledging the Kurdish question have never ended. While the Turkish establishment vacillated on whether to acknowledge the Kurdish question and its settlement, the usage of the term “Kurdistan,” remained a taboo in Turkey.

In their imperial spirit, the Ottomans, to whom the Turks consider themselves and Turkey the main heirs, had no problem acknowledging or referring to Kurdistan. On the contrary, in the fifteenth century at the apogee of the Empire, Sultan Suleiman I (the Lawgiver) who in the annals of Western historiography is entitled also “the Magnificent,” in a letter to the King of France, François I, boasted of being the “shadow of God on the Earth” and Sultan of the Mediterranean and Black Sea and the countries from Rumelia (Balkans) to Yemen and all the Arab lands—and Kurdistan. In 1847, in the attempt of reorganizing the administrative structure of the empire in order to centralize and modernize the Ottoman government, a state (*eyalet*) named Kurdistan was formed that comprised the governorate of Diyarbakır, the *sanjaks* of Van, Muş, and Hakkari, and the districts of Cizre, Bohtan, and Mardin,¹⁸ all within the borders of today’s Turkey.

Within the historical context, the foundation of the Republic of Turkey is seen as a radical and revolutionary rupture from the Ottoman past, and a step forward in the sequence of modernization process. However, ironically, referring to Kurdistan within the Ottoman imperial realm has become an anathema for the modern Turkish nation-state. Zürcher asserts that

the republic created out of the ruins of Ottoman Anatolia in October 1923, was, of course, legally and formally a new state. . . . At the same time, it is evident that in some ways Turkey is a very different heir to the empire, say, Syria or Albania. . . . it inherited not only the limbs but the head and heart of the empire, its cultural and administrative centre.¹⁹

Thus, in the imagination of the new state, acknowledgment of Kurdistan, implying the land inhabited by a non-Turkish ethno-national community, would prejudice its “head and heart” and also its “administrative centre.” It would also jeopardize its highly avowed unitary character, thereby arouse concerns on further dismemberment of the homeland, which is regarded in modern Turkish historiography as the “last refuge,” the land salvaged from the Ottoman imperial estate.

YES TO MUSTAFA KEMAL, NO TO ATATÜRK

To the extent of banning the use even of euphemisms for Kurdistan or the Kurdish language, acknowledgment of the Kurdish question proved to be

extremely difficult in the Republican era. In fact, during the initial phase of the national struggle (1919–1922), its leader Mustafa Kemal consistently nourished the hopes of certain Kurdish circles regarding the implementation of specific Kurdish national rights and privileges. This even goes back to October 1919, when Mustafa Kemal and his colleagues, in preparation for the national struggle in Anatolia, signed the Amasya Protocol. The Protocol was signed with the Minister of War of the Ottoman government on the borders of the Ottoman state to be defended against the victors of World War I. The Ottoman land to be defended was defined as *where Turks and Kurds live together*. The main reference point is the document adopted on January 20, 1921 (Teşkilat-ı Esasiye Kanunu), that practically served as the constitution of the national struggle until the foundation of the Republic of Turkey on October 29, 1923, and even later—that is, until the first Constitution of the republic was made in 1924. In the 1921 document, there is a reference to self-rule to be exercised by the governorates. The Kurdish political leaders continuously referred to Article 11 of the Teşkilat-ı Esasiye Kanunu as the basis of their claims for autonomy or federalism in Turkey.

The most crucial document in this respect is the Draft Law for a Proposed Autonomy of Kurdistan as Debated in the Grand National Assembly (at a secret session) on February 10, 1922.²⁰ The British High Commissioner in İstanbul, Sir Horace Rumbold, sent a telegram including the draft to British Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon. Thanks to the archives of the British Foreign Office, the draft has become a source of reference for those seeking autonomy for the Kurds.

Of the draft's 18 articles, the first is especially interesting. It reads as follows:

- (1) The Great National Assembly of Turkey, with the object of ensuring the progress of the Turkish nation in accordance with the requirements of civilization, undertakes to establish an autonomous administration for the Kurdish nation in harmony with their national customs.²¹

Articles 15 and 17 are of particular interest in understanding the limits of the autonomy envisaged for the Kurds:

- (15) The Turkish language only shall be employed in the Kurdish National Assembly, the service of the Governorate and in the administration of the Government. The Kurdish language, however, may be taught in the schools and the Governor may encourage its use provided that this shall not be made the basis of any future demand for the recognition of the Kurdish language as the official language of the government.

(17) No tax whatsoever may be imposed by the Kurdish National Assembly without the approval of the Governor-General and before the Great National Assembly of Angora [Ankara] shall be informed.²²

It should however be noted that some Turkish historians have contested the authenticity of the Draft Law for a Proposed Autonomy of Kurdistan, as cited in the appendix of Robert Olson's book *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism 1880–1925* on the grounds that the Turkish archives do not contain a secret session of the parliament on that date, February 10, 1922.

Another vital reference point regarding the “promise of Mustafa Kemal” on Kurdish autonomy that has been sporadically brought up over the years by Kurdish political figures is the conversation Mustafa Kemal had with prominent journalists like Ahmet Emin (Yalman) and Falih Rıfki (Atay) accompanying him in the city of İzmit, in the proximity of İstanbul, on January 16–17, 1923. In responding to a question by Ahmet Emin on what he thought about the Kurdish issue, Mustafa Kemal made reference to Teşkilat-ı Esasiyle Kanunu of 1921 that stipulates self-rule. Yet, he did not specified self-rule exclusively for the Kurds. On the contrary, he drew the attention of his audience to the practical impossibility of drawing borders to delineate the areas that the Turks and the Kurds are living in because of the deep penetration of the Kurdish element in those areas where Turks have settled.

The Kurdish political figures, nonetheless, made frequent references to this “promise” to promote their objectives to achieve self-rule within the context of Turkey's territorial integrity. Abdullah Öcalan in many of his texts and interviews alluded to the alleged documents and the “the press conference of Atatürk in İzmit, in January 1923.” He distinguished Mustafa Kemal from the other Turkish leaders and spoke and wrote positively about him, in general. In my long conversation with Murat Karayılan in November 2010, as the PKK's politico-military leader at large, he emphasized that Öcalan always exempted Mustafa Kemal “from the sins committed against the Kurds” and put the blame on the Unionists (İttihatçılar) and their remnants among the Kemalists.

İsmail Beşikçi, a Turkish scholar and sociologist who spent seventeen years in prison for his research on the Kurdish issue, made a distinction concerning the stance of Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) toward the Kurds. In his article entitled “Mustafa Kemal, Atatürk ve Kürtler” (“Mustafa Kemal, Atatürk and the Kurds”) published in October 2013, he wrote, “The sentiments and thoughts of Mustafa Kemal Pasha and Atatürk regarding the Kurds are very different. Mustafa Kemal Pasha connotes the year 1919 and the 1920s while Atatürk connotes the 1930s”²³ He proceeded to illustrate, in chronological order, how Mustafa Kemal Atatürk had deviated from his initial stance and changed his position on the Kurdish issue.

KURDISH AUTONOMY: FOREVER IMPOSSIBLE

Whether Mustafa Kemal ever signaled considering autonomy for the Kurds is still up for debate. But even if he did, it perhaps should be understood in the context of his wit and pragmatism under the most challenging circumstances of the national struggle. Indeed, these qualities were indispensable in forming alliances and gathering as much support as he could against formidable adversaries. As the goals that he had set were surmounted and achieved, he left his temporary and tactical alliances, dictated by the imperatives of the national struggle, behind. There was nothing to suggest that Mustafa Kemal had any ideological background to acknowledge self-rule in the Ottoman territories to be salvaged. Autonomy for Kurdistan was, of course, no exception.

For Jonathan C. Randal, the celebrated American journalist, a prominent expert on the Kurds, “Atatürk’s hallowed interest in the French revolution helped to explain Turkey’s unending penchant for Jacobinism, the belief in a centralized lay state uniting disparate peoples in the cult of the nation even at the expense of their own cultures, languages, religions, and other particularities.”²⁴ Randal asserted, “Only a state as slavishly faithful to the ossified letter of its founding dogma could have backed itself into a corner as totally as Turkey did.”²⁵

Erik J. Zürcher, in his seminal work entitled *The Young Turk Legacy: From the Ottoman Empire to Atatürk’s Turkey*, argued that the modernization project of Mustafa Kemal and the new leaders of the Turkish nation-state left no room for Kurdish self-rule:

In the debate about Westernization, Kemal and his circle belonged to the radical wing of the Young Turks. . . . In their eyes. . . only a nation state could give Turkey the coherence needed to compete with the national states of Europe. . . they opted for secular Turkish nationalism. This of course precluded any idea of Kurdish autonomy.²⁶

Ryan Gingeras, an American historian and an imaginative mind on the late Ottoman, early Republican Turkish history, has a similar view. Following the publication of his book *Fall of the Sultanate: The Great War and the End of the Ottoman Empire 1908–1922*, in an interview in May 2016, almost a year after the disheartening end of the Kurdish peace process and during a period of revived war with the Kurds, he voiced a striking observation on the parallels between the late Ottoman and Turkish perceptions on Kurdish autonomy. His interviewer made the following remark, “As I read about various nationalist movements breaking off from the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans, I kept being reminded of the Kurds. Even the language used is similar: Decentralization, greater autonomy, and independence. It is another

example of echoes from a century ago resonating today.” To which Gingeras responded:

I find strong parallels in the core premise that was established decades before the Ottoman Empire’s final collapse: Only a state governed centrally, and uncompromising in its treatment of regional centers of opposition, can survive. This is a lesson that gets drawn by leading Ottoman and later Turkish officials: Any time a provincial group demands some sort of renegotiation of the way the government works where they live, it is just the first step that eventually leads to rebellion or separatism and has to be clamped down on. Otherwise, essentially the state is committing suicide.

With Kurds in particular, it’s clear that at the end of the Ottoman Empire there’s no one single Kurdish politics. Politically, the Kurds were fragmented. There was a political ambivalence among many different segments of Anatolian society regarding the future of the state. Between 1914 and 1922, society was totally devastated in all the places where Kurds lived. There was simply not much incentive to debate heady ideas about the future of government when people are just trying to survive. When we finally see a debate about the future of Anatolia on the part of Kurds and Kurdish nationalists, the response within the Turkish elite has already been programmed that this is something that cannot be tolerated: Federalism, decentralization, and provincial autonomy are bad words and cannot be tolerated.²⁷

With regard to the Kurdish question, the aftermath of the year 2015 could be seen as a recurrence of the early 1920s. In Mustafa Kemal’s “New Turkey” that replaced the defunct Ottoman Empire in the first half of the 1920s, the idea of “Kurdish autonomy” was no more than a delusion. Almost a century later, when Tayyip Erdoğan declared his “New Turkey” in the second half of the 2010s presumably to replace the Kemalist Turkey, the idea of Kurdish autonomy seemed, once again, an illusion. That was because, some aspects of novelty aside, Tayyip Erdoğan’s Turkey was less of a break from the Kemalist Turkey than a continuity concerning the cardinal issue of the country: the Kurdish question.

NOTES

1. Ethnic Greek Orthodox subjects of the Ottoman Empire and later, the Republic of Turkey. The term “Rûm” distinguishes them from the Hellenes of the mainland Greece. It means “Roman” in old Turkish, with reference to Byzantium, the East Roman Empire.

2. Hans-Lukas Kieser, *Talaat Pasha-Father of Modern Turkey, Architect of Genocide* (Princeton & Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2018), 259, 261.
3. Barış Ünlü, *Türklük Sözleşmesi-Oluşumu, İşleyişi, Krizi* [Turkishness contract: Its evolution, working, crisis] (Ankara: Dipnot Yayınları, 2018), 14–15.
4. Ibid., 254, 255.
5. Erik J. Zürcher, *The Young Turk Legacy and Nation Building: From the Ottoman Empire to Atatürk's Turkey* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 149.
6. İsmail Beşikçi, *Cumhuriyet Halk Fırkasının Tüzüğü (1927) ve Kürt Sorunu* [The constitution of the Republican People's Party (1927) and the Kurdish question] (İstanbul, 1978), 83.
7. Sami N. Özerdim, *Atatürk Devrimi Kronolojisi* [Chronology of Atatürk Revolution] (Ankara, 1974), 75.
8. *Tarih IV Türkiye Cumhuriyeti* [History IV Republic of Turkey] (İstanbul, 1931), 182.
9. Zürcher, *The Young Turk Legacy*, 233.
10. The Kurdish Population, *Fondation Institut de Kurde de Paris*, January 12, 2017. <https://www.institutkurde.org/en/info/the-kurdish-population-1232551004>.
11. David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 464.
12. Ibid., 464, 465.
13. M. Philips Price, *A History of Turkey from Empire to Republic* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1956), 32.
14. Bilal Şimşir, *İngiliz Belgeleriyle Türkiye'de Kürt Sorunu (1924–1938)* (Ankara: TTK Basımevi, 1991), 58.
15. Gerard Chailand, *A People Without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan* (London: Zed Books, 1980, 1993), 56.
16. Hüseyin Nihal Atsız, “Kuşmalar-1” [Speeches-1], *Ötüken Dergisi*, April 1967.
17. Hüseyin Nihal Atsız, “Kızıl Kürtlerin Yaygarası” [Red Kurds' Brouhaha], *Ötüken Dergisi*, June 1967.
18. <http://candname.com/kurdistan-eyaletinin-kurulmasi-ve-osmanli-devlet-s-alamelerinde-kurdistan-eyaleti/>.
19. Zürcher, *The Young Turk Legacy*, 141.
20. Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism 1880–1925* (University of Texas Press, 1989), 166–68.
21. Ibid., 166.
22. Ibid., 167, 168.
23. <http://www.zazaki.net/haber/mustafa-kemal,-ataturk-ve-kurtler-1624.htm>.
24. Jonathan C. Randal, *After Such Knowledge, What Forgiveness? My Encounters with Kurdistan* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 255.
25. Ibid., 251.
26. Zürcher, *The Young Turk Legacy*, 232.
27. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/interview-ryan-gingeras-on-the-collap-se-of-the-ottoman-empire-99151>.

Chapter 2

Kurdish Uprisings

“There is no Kurdish problem where a Turkish bayonet appears.”¹ This is what the İstanbul-based journal *Vakit* announced on May 7, 1925. It is not a denial nor an acknowledgment of the Kurdish question. On the contrary, it signifies acquiescence to the existence of the problem. What was emphasized was the way to tackle and resolve it: introducing the military solution to the problem that confronted Turkey immediately following the foundation of the Republic. *Vakit*’s characterization, given the strict government control on the media, was indeed reflecting the official point of view concerning the Sheikh Said rebellion, the first Kurdish nationalist violent response with strong religious undertone against the secular Turkish nation-state at its earliest stage of construction.

The Sheikh Said rebellion was the first to leave a permanent link in the chain of Kurdish insurgencies that threatened Turkey’s territorial integrity and ultimately its survival. The Turkish (state) response to Kurds’ taking up arms was and has been ferocious. As David McDowell pointed out in his seminal book *A Modern History of the Kurds*, the most comprehensive source concerning the saga of the Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, “nothing that Iraq’s Kurds could complain of remotely compared with the oppression meted out to Turkey’s Kurds.”²

The Sheikh Said rebellion broke out prematurely on February 8, 1925, and was suppressed by the Turkish military might in April of that year. Its leader, a locally influential clergyman of the Naqshbandi order, Sheikh Said (1865–1925), was executed along with the ringleaders of the short-lived uprising. Even their remains disappeared. Not a trace of the leadership of the rebellion was left, probably to prevent burial sites from serving as the object of pilgrimage or reference points for the future Kurdish generations. Following the suppression, the Kurds of Turkey were subjected to assimilation into the

upper Muslim identity, the Turk. Any and every measure from deportation, in order to change the demography of the Kurdish-majority regions, to the introduction of new restrictive legislation has been implemented to this end.

KURDISH REBELLION SHAPING TURKISH DOMESTIC POLITICS

The consequences and importance of the first Kurdish rebellion in the post-Republican Turkey were not confined solely to the Kurdish question. As would be seen persistently in the unfolding of the Republican Turkish history, it yielded results in shaping the nature of the new regime that was being installed, and also has become instrumental and manipulative regarding the power struggle that has been ongoing among the founders of the new state.

British historian and Labour MP M. Philips Price (1885–1973) in his undeservedly unnoticed book *A History of Turkey: From Empire to Republic*, published in 1956, astutely observed the pertinence of the issue to the overall nature of the regime of the young Republic. He wrote: “Following the Kurdish revolt in 1925 and the suppression of the Liberals and remnants of the Young Turks in 1926, Turkey became for a time a totalitarian state. All power was virtually concentrated in the hands of Mustafa Kemal.”³

What Tayyip Erdoğan did with respect to the Kurdish problem and his regime change steering Turkey from an, albeit imperfect, parliamentary democracy toward a presidential government system with extraordinary executive powers vested in him looks like a replica of Mustafa Kemal’s handling of the Kurdish revolt of 1925, in eliminating his political opponents (including potential ones) and further consolidating his grip on power. The following assessment in *A History of Turkey: From Empire to Republic* is noteworthy:

Mustafa Kemal . . . saw his opportunity . . . to rush through the Assembly a Statute of Law and Order; established press censorship and set up special tribunals. . . . These tribunals dealt summarily with the Kurdish ringleaders and even those . . . who had given him trouble in the past.⁴

The most authoritative source on the first Kurdish rebellion of the Turkish Republican era is Robert Olson’s *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism 1880–1925*. His narrative, on the aforementioned matter, is more articulate and informative: “The Sheikh Said rebellion occurred at a crucial time in the developing domestic politics of Turkey. . . . The most authoritative source on the first Kurdish rebellion of the Turkish Republican era is Robert Olson’s *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism 1880–1925*.” His narrative, on the

matter mentioned above, is more articulate and informative: “The Sheikh Said rebellion occurred at a crucial time in the developing domestic politics of Turkey. . . . As a result of the struggle for power between the ardent Kemalists and those who opposed some of the policies of Mustafa Kemal (the Second Group and Kazım Karabekir, Ali Fuad Cebesoy, Rauf Orbay, Refet Bele, Adnan Adıvar, Halide Edip, etc.),”⁵ Atatürk thought it imperative to call İsmet İnönü back to the government. İsmet İnönü wanted to adopt a much harder line and to mobilize more military force against the rebellion than the Prime Minister Fethi Okyar. Mustafa Kemal sided with İnönü and his hard-line approach. İnönü criticized the press that was opposed to Mustafa Kemal, saying that indirectly encouraged the rebellion because of its opposition the government’s secularization policies. . . . On 25 February, the government proclaimed martial law in all of the eastern provinces. . . . After losing a vote of confidence within the People’s Party on March 2, Fethi Okyar resigned, and İsmet İnönü again became prime minister with a mandate from the government and from Mustafa Kemal to pursue strong measures against Sheikh Said. The very next day, March 4, İnönü got the Grand National Assembly to pass the Takriri Sükun Kanunu (Restoration of Order Law). This law allowed for the reactivation of independence tribunals for two years. Granted dictatorial power to convict, imprison, and execute rebels or traitors against the government, the independence tribunals were to be operative in Diyarbakır and Ankara. The Ankara tribunals were to be utilized to prosecute individuals opposed to the Kemalists. The tribunal in Diyarbakır was to be used primarily to prosecute and sentence the rebels and their collaborators. The great significance of the Restoration of Order was not lost on the opposition to Mustafa Kemal, which realized that it could and would be used to limit or stop all newspapers and publications that stated views differing were from those of the government.⁶

The story is continued by another writer, David McDowell, in his *A Modern History of the Kurds*:

In early April Kâzım Karabekir and a colleague, both vociferous critics of Mustafa Kemal’s autocracy were denounced by two *khojas*, as supporting the insurgents in their attempt to restore the caliphate. Despite the absurdity of the accusation, it served notice of the government’s intention to crush him and his associates. Karabekir was accused of writing to Khalid Beg Jibran [the most important military commander of the rebellion] two years earlier complaining “They [the Kemalists] are attacking the very principles which perpetuate the existence of the Muhammadan world,” while his Progressive Republican Party was accused of sending delegates to stir up religious fervor in the Eastern vilayets. That the Progressives roundly condemned the revolt did not protect them. In the second week of April, the party headquarters suffered a night raid by the

police and all its papers were confiscated. The party was suppressed. Likewise, the government began to harrÿ journalists who wrote unwelcome commentaries on political events.⁷

Whatever opportunity the botched military coup of July 15, 2016, provided to Tayyip Erdoğan for eliminating his political opponents, stifling any dissent to his regime change that transformed Turkey’s parliamentary system into a presidential government system giving the president unprecedented executive power, thereby consolidating his one-man rule, a variant of autocracy, as we will see later in this book—the Sheikh Said rebellion in 1925, the first Kurdish uprising against the Turkish nation-state, almost provided the same to Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk). Built around a personality cult, along with the alleged assassination plot in İzmir that targeted him in the following year, Atatürk’s one-man rule ended with his death in 1938. It was replaced by the reign of İsmet İnönü, which ended 1950 thanks to a global paradigm shift as a result of the end of World War II.

What July 15, 2016, is to Tayyip Erdoğan, Sheikh Said rebellion in 1925 was to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. For some with knowledge of European history and the advent of totalitarianism in Europe, the Reichstag fire in 1933 Berlin that became a milestone in the future practices of Hitler and Nazi Germany served as an analogy to explain the function of the botched coup of July 15, 2016. Yet, Turkish history itself provides much more apt and vivid precedents for such an analogy, like the Sheikh Said rebellion in 1925.

THE SHEIKH SAID REBELLION AND THE MOSUL QUESTION

One of the unintended, yet most important consequences of the Sheikh Said rebellion concerned the ultimate settlement of the Mosul question, the only but ostensibly the main issue that remained unresolved between Turkey and Britain even in the Treaty of Lausanne (July 1924).

The Ottoman province of Mosul, with its Kurdish-majority population, was claimed by Turkey. It comprised the entire area of today’s Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq, as well as “the disputed territories,” stretching diagonally from the northeastern corner of Syria with Turkey and Iraq to the current Iraq-Iran frontier near Baghdad. These territories were included in the National Covenant adopted by the Ottoman Parliament in its last session. The National Covenant was published on February 12, 1920, just before the occupying powers in İstanbul that were landed in the wake of World War I disbanded the Ottoman Parliament. The National Covenant defined the borders of Turkey following the Great War. The six decisions taken in the last session of the

Ottoman Parliament in İstanbul were later used as the basis for the claims of the Turkish Grand National Assembly that was inaugurated on April 23, 1920, in Ankara. In terms of drawing the borders of the “New Turkey,” it also formed the basis of Turkish claims in the Treaty of Lausanne. Interestingly, at the Lausanne negotiations, İsmet İnönü laid claim to Mosul because its population was non-Arab. He claimed it on the grounds that its Kurds were, in reality, Turks. The exchange between him and the British chief negotiator Lord Curzon at Lausanne were reported in many sources. Curzon, who was determined to hang on to Mosul, for the sake of oil rather than its Kurds, was withering: “It was reserved for the Turkish delegation for the first time in history to discover that the Kurds were Turks. Nobody has found out it before.”⁸

Whatever the legitimacy of the Turkish claims on Mosul, for the British, the Ottoman administrative unit (*vilayet*) of Mosul had to be united with the former Ottoman vilayets of Baghdad and Basra for the creation of the new state of Iraq under the British mandate. Incorporation of the Mosul vilayet into Iraq was seen as a *sine qua non* for the economic viability of the newly designed state, even without the oil wealth discovered by the British in Kirkuk, a part of the province. The Mosul vilayet would provide wheat for Iraq.

The dispute on the Mosul vilayet was submitted to arbitration before the League of Nations since neither Turkey nor Britain was willing to allow to the treaty negotiations at Lausanne to collapse because of that single sticking point. A Mosul Commission was formed in November 1924 under the chair of a Swedish diplomat (Carl Einer Wirsén), and including the membership of a former Hungarian prime minister (Count Pal Teleki) known for his staunch pro-Turkish views, as well as a Belgian colonel (Albert Paulis). The three-member Commission came to Mosul vilayet in January 1925, toured the province and conducted interviews until March 1925, and presented its findings to the League in July 1925. A second Mosul Commission was then formed under the chair of Estonian general Johan Laidoner who visited the province in the same year. General Laidoner presented his Commission’s report to the League of Nations in November 1925. The findings in the second report were almost identical with the previous one. The bottom line of the both was that without the incorporation of Mosul vilayet to the Baghdad and Basra vilayets, the entity to be called Iraq under the British mandate could not survive—although, from the legal point of view, the disputed area should be considered as an integral part of Turkey.

THE BRITISH “BETRAYAL”

The concurrence of the Kurdish revolt and the arbitration efforts of the League of Nations on the unresolved Mosul vilayet issue between Turkey and

Britain led many Turkish nationalists to see “British finger” behind the Sheikh Said rebellion. The treaty that was signed in Ankara on June 5, 1926, between the United Kingdom, Iraq, and Turkey regarding the settlement of the frontier between Turkey and Iraq based on the decision reached by the League of Nations, to the effect that Turkey relinquished its claims on the Mosul vilayet, strengthened the nationalist conviction on the correlation between the Kurdish revolt and the alleged British machinations. The overriding belief in the Turkish nationalist milieu until today is that the legitimately claimed Mosul vilayet was lost and eventually incorporated into Iraq due to sinister British political maneuvers fomenting Kurdish unrest inside Turkey proper, that is, the Sheikh Said rebellion. However, the historical facts, data and documents open to scholarly research on that period of history do not support such Turkish arguments. Robert Olson, the foremost international expert on the Sheikh Said rebellion, wrote the following eye-opener:

The objections raised by the Middle East Department and the director of intelligence at the War Office in late autumn 1921 regarding possible support of a Kurdish rebellion in Turkey still obtained during the period of the Sheikh Said rebellion. . . . In my research in the Public Record Office, I found no documents to indicate that the British changed their policy regarding support for Kurdish rebellion(s) and revolt(s) in Turkey. The policy as established in November 1921 remained in effect up to the outbreak of Sheikh Said’s rebellion on 8 February 1925, in spite of the differences between Great Britain and Turkey resulting over the failure to resolve the Mosul question.⁹

The British determination of not supporting any Kurdish rebellion or revolt in Turkey that goes back to the year 1921 was the outcome of abandonment of the idea of Kurdish independence. In the Paris Peace Conference when the idea of an independent Armenia was shelved, “Kurdistan was finished too. By March 1921 the Allies had backed away from the vague promises in the Treaty of Sèvres,” writes Margaret MacMillan.

As far as Kurdistan was concerned, they said, they were ready to modify the treaty in “a sense of conformity with the existing facts on the ground of the situation.” The existing facts’ were that Atatürk had denounced the whole treaty; he had successfully kept part of the Armenian territories within Turkey; and he was about to sign a treaty giving the rest to the Soviet Union. Kurdish nationalists might protest but the Allies no longer had any interest in an independent Kurdish state.¹⁰

According to MacMillan, British indifference vis-à-vis the Kurdish independence bid extends back to the period of the Paris Peace Conference in 1919.

Unlike other emerging nations, Kurdistan had no powerful patrons in Paris, and the Kurds were not yet able to speak effectively for themselves. Busy with their habitual cattle raids, abductions, clan wars, and brigandage, with the enthusiastic slaughter of Armenians or simply with survival, they had not so far demonstrated much interest even in greater autonomy within the Ottoman Empire, where the majority lived. Before the Great War, the nationalisms stirring among the other peoples of the Middle East had produced only faint echoes among the Kurds.¹¹

Following such derogatory characterization of the Kurds, she continues:

British support was at best lukewarm in 1919 and was tied, at least partly, to the United States taking on a mandate for Armenia. By the autumn it was clear that was not going to happen. It was also clear that the Turks were far from finished. Atatürk was rapidly building his forces in the east, close to the Kurdish areas. The idea of Britain's propping up a separate Kurdistan became increasingly unattractive from both financial and military points of view. . . . In Mesopotamia, British authorities argued for incorporating part of the Kurdish territory to the new mandate of Iraq.¹²

Jonathan C. Randal, too, is categorical on the British "betrayal" to the Kurds:

The British entrusted with a League of Nations mandate for Ottoman territory in what was to be called Iraq, were also bent on thwarting Kurdish nationalist aspirations. Determined to control the oil in territory Kurds claimed as theirs, Britain forced them into a blood-spattered union with its freshly minted Iraqi state, dominated by its Sunni Arab minority.¹³

KEMALIST REALPOLITIK ON MOSUL: DIVIDING KURDISTAN

Britain had no real reason to instigate or support a Kurdish rebellion in Turkey. It had had no interest in an independent Kurdistan since the beginning of the 1920s. For Kemalist Turkey, the Mosul vilayet was never a high priority, and ironically the Sheikh Said rebellion led Turkish leaders, and primarily Mustafa Kemal himself, to think that Turkey's best interests would be served if the Mosul vilayet were left out of the "New Turkey." Leaving out the Mosul vilayet would make Turkification easier in Asia Minor. It would also remove an obstacle for the rapprochement with Britain that Mustafa Kemal deemed necessary.

The implications of this revolt to the government were obvious. First, the region represented a security problem. This, of course, was well known to the Turks, as it had been so long before the period of Ottoman rule. Second, any attempt to exercise a greater level of control in the Mosul district would only extend military supply lines through already hostile territory. Pacifying the region would present a greater drain on the already extended Turkish resources. While a divided Kurdistan troubled many in the regime . . . the loss of Mosul would create a new frontier far more suitable geographically for the Turks. In giving up the province, the Turks lost a major transportation hub as well as the oil fields of Kirkuk. At the same time they gave up a largely Kurdish population, an attractive option to the nationalists who were engaged in the program of Turkification during this post-Lausanne era of population exchanges. Indeed, if one looks at late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century history, it becomes clear that the process of drawing borders and exchanging populations to reify those borders was one aspect, if not the dominant aspect, of government policy. With the advent of the Young Turks and then the Republicans under Kemal, the process took on an ever more nationalist bent. . . . For the founding fathers of the new regime in Ankara, job one was to simply survive. Once the Greeks had been defeated in 1922, the immediate existence of the regime was no longer in question. At this point, however, territorial integrity was still very much in the forefront of their thinking. Mosul, with its largely Kurdish population, was an extremely low priority.¹⁴

In those years, the main aim of Turkish foreign policy was rapprochement with Britain. Turkey was also appraising diminishing a Kurdish population that could be difficult to control in the future. A divided Kurdistan was to its interest in this regard. Therefore, it acquiesced to the division of what had been one single unit geopolitically throughout history and pondered abandoning the Mosul vilayet. Leaving Mosul outside was a Kemalist decision, yet this remained unregistered as a fact in the Turkish official historiography.

From the last quarter of the nineteenth century on, distancing from Britain—which had become the greatest guarantor of the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire until then—had brought the Empire’s end. Kemalist Turkey was in favor of changing the direction of foreign policy for a new rapprochement with Britain. If the price of such policy overhaul would be relinquishing the Mosul vilayet, Mustafa Kemal and his team were willing to pay that price. The names Eastern Anatolia and Southeastern Anatolia were designated to those parts of Kurdistan that would remain in Turkey, and the populations inhabiting those regions would be subjected to vigorous policies of Turkification and assimilation.

The fate of the Mosul vilayet, in a sense, was meant as a geopolitical rearrangement of Kurdistan. With Mosul to be delivered to Iraq under British tutelage, it would be considered that no Kurd would remain in Turkey. Prior to the ruptures that occurred in 1925 and 1926, in the first decade following the end of the Great War, the destinies of the Kurdish-majority inhabitants of the Mosul, who would later be called Iraqi Kurds, were interconnected with those of their kin in Turkey. The connection had been established through the Treaty of Sèvres, the only treaty that was not implemented among the post-war treaties.¹⁵

Not the suppression of the Sheikh Said rebellion, but the abolition of the Caliphate by the Kemalist regime alienated the Kurds of Mosul from Turkey. With the defeat of the Kurdish revolt and more importantly the settlement of the border question over a trilateral agreement between Britain Iraq and Turkey, interaction between the Kurds of Turkey and those of Iraq was severely hampered. C. J. Edmonds, a British political officer in Iraqi Kurdistan during the 1920s, in his *Kurds, Turks and Arabs: Politics, Travel and Research in North-Eastern Iraq 1919–1925* disclosed the feelings of surprise and astonishment among the British officials in Mosul when they heard in mid-March 1924 that the Turkish Grand National Assembly had abolished the caliphate. Edmonds wrote that the propaganda that had kept Kurdistan like a volcano ready to erupt was mainly due to the loyalty that the Kurds held toward the highest authority of their religion, the caliphate in İstanbul.

The abolition of the caliphate not only broke the spiritual and emotional bonds connecting the Kurds of Mosul (later the Iraqi Kurds) to İstanbul, it also incited the religious segments of Turkey's Kurdish community to revolt under the banner of the influential Sheikh Said. Ottoman Kurds' loyalty, through their religious identity, was to İstanbul. But the imperial Ottoman İstanbul, the seat of the Muslim caliphate, was replaced by the republican Turkish nation-state's Ankara, with which the Kurds could not identify themselves. Because of the deeply religious identity of its leadership, the Sheikh Said rebellion allowed Ankara to portray the situation as the revolt of reactionaries against the progressive modernists.

AUTOPSY OF THE FIRST KURDISH REBELLION

In reality, although the rebellion broke out prematurely, there was a long period of preparation done by a clandestine nationalist organization called in short Azadi (Freedom, in Kurdish). The date of foundation of Cıwata Azadi Kurd (Society for Kurdish Freedom), later named Cıwata Kweseriya Kurd

(Society for Kurdish Independence), is unclear: some claim it to be in 1921, some in 1923. Either way, the organization was responsible for the events leading up to Sheikh Said rebellion. The majority of its founders were nationalist Kurds who had served as officers in the Ottoman army during World War I. Its organizational mode was secretive, and events had moved very quickly since its establishment. Facing difficulties against a constantly on-guard Turkish intelligence and with the time-consuming task of inculcating nationalism in uneducated, poverty-stricken Kurdish society, Azadi leaders realized that the Kurdish populace would believe the sheikhs due to their traditional position and the high regard in which they were held. Azadi's ranks were therefore filled with sheikhs belonging to the Naqshbandi order. After the arrest of hundreds of Azadi leaders in the wake of a mutiny, the sheikhs were the only ones left to lead the rebellion that was being prepared. They had become indispensable. The supreme command of the rebellion thus fell to the most respected, spiritually admired and trusted nationalist, Sheikh Said.¹⁶

The rebellion, when it broke out prematurely on February 8, 1925, had around 15,000 fighting men opposed initially by 25,000 Turkish troops. By April, Turkish troops numbered slightly over 50,000. In mid-April, Sheikh Said was captured, and along with other ringleaders was tried in Diyarbakır and hanged on June 29, 1925, the date considered as the end of the rebellion. By late August 1925, British intelligence which was monitoring the developments with extreme attention and had the most reliable sources for collecting data estimated 357 Kurdish notables had been sentenced to death by the independence tribunals, which had been reactivated to deal with the rebellion. After the capture of Sheikh Said, extensive operations continued to crush the seeds that could grow any possible future Kurdish nationalist movement. The hardest fought battles took place in March, and the tide of the rebellion was turned back in that month. Numerous factors ranging from tribal divisions among the Kurds; sectarian differences that pushed the Alevi Kurds to side with the Turkish government against a Sunni-clergy led rebellion; betrayal, a historically common trait of Kurdish revolts in the region; and lack of significant endorsement of support internationally and from the region, culminated in its eventual defeat.

Although there are varying numbers on casualties, there is not much dispute that no less than 5,000 people lost their lives as the Sheikh Said rebellion was quelled. The figure might even be somewhat higher than this. Robert Olson emphasized that the greatest suffering of the Kurds was not from the numbers killed or the casualties they sustained, but rather from the lands destroyed, villages burned, people deported, and persecution and harassment by Turkish officers, soldiers, and gendarmeries. While this brutality peaked during the period of the rebellion and its aftermath throughout 1925, harsh tactics continued unabated throughout 1926 and 1927. After a brief respite,

similar tactics and measures were again employed during the rebellion of 1929–1930.¹⁷ The Sheikh Said rebellion, albeit defeated heavily and suppressed mercilessly, had ignited the chain of Kurdish rebellions of different magnitudes.

SYRIA: NEW POLITICAL HEADQUARTERS

With the brutal suppression of the revolt, deportation, and harassment of the Kurds, the Kurdish nationalist leadership came under attack. As a number of Kurdish tribes that had participated in the revolt were forced to flee across the borders, Syria became the recipient of many members of Turkey's Kurdish nationalist and traditionalist leadership and thousands of Kurds who took part in the rebellion. The exact number of Kurds who went to Syria in this way and who were accommodated by the French mandate authorities in Syria is unknown. Academic research suggests that it would be around 25,000.¹⁸

Those who fled to Syria included Kurds, such as Jaladat (Celadet) Ali Bedirkhan (1893–1851) who created the Kurdish-Kurmanji alphabet in Latin letters, and his brother Kamuran Bedirkhan (1895–1978) belonging to the ruling dynasty of Cizre; Botan (Jazirat al-Omar), who were the forerunners of Kurdish nationalist sentiment in the nineteenth century; Ihsan Nuri Pasha, the commander of the second big Kurdish revolt in the aftermath of Sheikh Said rebellion; Ekrem Jamil Pasha (1891–1974) and Kadri Jamil Pasha (1892–1973), renowned notables of Diyarbakir; and Osman Sabri (1905–93), the founder of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Party in 1957.

The settling of Turkey's Kurdish national leadership in Syria sowed the seeds for the intertwined nature of Turkey's and Syria's Kurdish problem, as would be seen in the second decade of the 2000s. In the short run, their settlement with some rebellious Kurdish tribes in Syria laid the ground for the second most important Kurdish rebellion in Turkish Republican history: the Ararat Rebellion of 1927–1931.

As much as the trans-border character of the Kurdish question was determined by the installation of the Kurdish nationalist leadership in the territory of Syria,¹⁹ it is also indicative that, for the Kurds, whether they were on the Turkish or Syrian side of the border (which was disputed at the time by France, the mandatory power in Syria and Turkey), the overlap was more of a common space, in terms of language, tribal affiliation, ethnicity, and family, rather than a distinct line of separation.²⁰ Moreover, in the 1920s, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq had not yet emerged in nation-state format, thus for the Kurds, the borders that delineated the former Ottoman territories between Turkey and its new southern neighbors, Syria and Iraq, did not carry much practical significance.

FRANCE IN SYRIA: DIFFERENT FROM BRITAIN IN IRAQ

France, as the mandatory power in Syria, should be considered the main reason attracting the beleaguered Kurdish nationalist leadership of Turkey and the bulk of the rebellious tribes escaping from the wrath of Turkish power. As historian Tejel explicates:

French policy in the Levant went completely in the opposite direction to that of the British in Iraq. Instead of looking for support from unified Sunni Arab nationalism, the French policy was based on the defense of non-Sunni communities, notably the Druzes, the Alawites, and the Christians. The French administration presented itself simply as being the arbitrator between the ethnic and religious minorities and the Sunni Muslim majority. . . . For France, Syrian unity was nothing more than an Arab nationalist invention perceived as an artificial creation of the British to harm French interests in the Middle East.²¹

As Syria under French rule presented the best refuge for the Kurdish exiles from Turkey, those nationalists, both intellectual and tribal, continued their endeavors to confront the Turkish government from the Syrian territory. Allsop explains:

The efforts of Kurdish exiles culminated in the establishment of the Xoybun League in 1927. The committee which came together for its formal establishment in Lebanon was made up of Kurdish intellectuals, leaders of tribes, sheiks and rebel fighters from Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. The group set out to unite the Kurdish movement around a single aim: to unify their political efforts and turn their struggle towards Turkey and the liberation of the Kurds from Turkish claws.²²

The spelling Xoybun, according to alphabet developed by its founding leader Jaladat Bedirkhan, also transliterated as Khoybun or Hoybun. It literally meant “Be Yourself” connoting independence. “This committee,” wrote Jordi Tejel in his chapter entitled “The Kurds during French Mandate,”

was the basis for the conceptualization, in Kurmanji dialect, of modern Kurdish nationalism, and by consequence, for the widespread doctrine in Turkey and Syria. The Khoybun League made deliberate efforts to create diplomatic contact, for the most part unofficial, with state players (Iran, France, Great Britain, Italy, the Soviet Union) and nonstate actors of the region (Armenians and the Turkish opposition). In so doing, the Khoybun succeeded in establishing itself as part of the network of politico-military alliances, to such a degree that it became an essential regional actor, for example, at the time of the Ararat revolt (1927–31).²³

Tejel continues:

It is clear that the French authorities could have prevented, from the very beginning, all activity by the Khoybun League if it had so wished. According to available documentation, the French Intelligence Services were well aware of the Kurdish committee's subversive activities. The movements and contacts of its members were under surveillance.²⁴

However, French authorities were aware of the potential usefulness of the Kurdish nationalist activity against the Kemalist regime in Turkey even while Franco-Turkish negotiations on the delimitation of the Turkish–Syrian border were underway. They wanted to employ the “Kurdish card” against Turkey.

ARARAT: THE SECOND BIG REVOLT

The most significant role of the Khoybun League was its involvement in execution of the Ararat revolt (in Turkish *Ağrı Dağı İsyanı*). At the founding meeting of Khoybun in Beirut, Ihsan Nuri Pasha, a Kurdish officer who had served in the Ottoman army, was declared as the supreme commander of the Kurdish forces on Mt. Ararat (Ağrı Dağı). “In 1928 he initiated the revolt leading his men to Mount Ararat and set up a mini Kurdish proto-state which flew the Kurdish flag and had thousands of trained and armed forces.”²⁵

Unlike their response during the Sheikh Said rebellion, at the initial stages of the Ararat revolt the Turkish authorities made attempts of conciliation with the rebellious Kurdish forces. These went nowhere however, and in 1930 a military campaign was launched. Mount Ararat was surrounded from all sides, and the Turkish air force continuously rained bombs over the rebels. The same year also saw a big massacre in the Zilan valley, situated at the northwest corner of Lake Van and in the proximity of the rebel headquarters on Mount Ararat. The Turkish daily *Cumhuriyet*, in its 16 July 1930 issue, claimed that 15,000 people were annihilated in the Zilan military operation, and that Zilan Creek flowing in the valley was filled with corpses. The campaign against the rebellious Kurds was over by September 17, 1930. The insurrection was entirely defeated by 1931 and the central government of Turkey resumed control over the territory.

During the rebellion, because the border between Turkey and Persia (Iran) ran up the side of Lesser Ararat (in Turkish *Küçük Ağrı*) to its peak, Turkish military was unable to stop Kurdish fighters from crossing the border at an extremely rugged location. After extinguishing the revolt and resuming control over the territory, Turkey demanded that the entire mountain be ceded. In January, the two countries signed the agreement redesigning the frontier. Compensating Persia with 90 square miles in the vicinity of the mountain,

Turkey acquired the entirety of the 5,165-meter Mt. Ararat and extending to its southeast to incorporate Lesser Ararat (*Küçük Ağrı*), itself 3,896 meters in height.

Following the failure of the Ararat revolt, Khoynun ceased to function. As the revolt began in 1928, the French and British mandate administrations had imposed onerous restrictions on those who were involved with the organization, under pressure from Turkey. The French authorities took further measures to remove the Khoynun chiefs from the Kurdish regions of Syria. The brothers Jaladat and Kamuran Bedirkhan were forbidden from entering the regions east of the river Euphrates. Even during times of high Franco-Turkish tension, France always sided with Ankara, to the detriment of the Kurdish nationalists, wrote Jordi Tejel.²⁶ With the passage of time and the diminishing value of the “Kurdish card” against Turkey, the French-Kurdish collaboration, limited as it was, ended in 1936, the year of the signing of the treaty between France and Syria, which foreshadowed the French military withdrawal from the territories of Syria and the country’s independence. A year later, in 1937, a French-Turkish rapprochement was underway, signaled by relinquishing to Turkey the Sanjak of Alexandretta (*İskenderun* in Turkish, then called the Province of Hatay), which was ultimately given in 1939. Utilization of the Kurds against Turkey was no longer an item on the French agenda.

Despite the perception of the Turks, and the expectation of the Kurds, the foreign support from the Big Powers once again did not materialize, just like in the case of the Sheikh Said rebellion. Besides, the activities of the rebels were restrained to the extent that Kurds started perceiving their abstinence as a betrayal. Kurdish sentimentalism aside, the imperatives of realpolitik never worked in the Kurds’ favor in the 1920s and 1930s, similar to what would be witnessed half a century later.

DERSIM: THE ALEVI-ZAZA’S TURN AND THE MASSACRE

Following the suppression of the Ararat revolt, it was Dersim’s turn. An area with stiff, majestic mountains, Dersim was the exclusive home to Alevi-Zaza Kurds and Armenians before 1915, and had traditionally enjoyed virtual autonomy for centuries, mainly due its topography. The new highly centralized Kemalist state, an intrinsically Turkish Sunni edifice, would not permit the survival of such a de facto autonomous entity in a rebellious Kurdish region, as demonstrated by revolts of different magnitudes and responses by the state since the foundation of the Republic. The first Kurdish revolt, coming before the foundation of the Republic, was an Alevi uprising known as

the Koçgiri revolt of 1921, in a region adjacent to Dersim that some historians and geographers considered the Koçgiri region belonging to the Greater Dersim area. The Society for Rise of Kurdistan (*Kürdistan Teali Cemiyeti*), the first Kurdish nationalist organization, was formed in İstanbul in 1918 with the aim of establishing an independent Kurdistan. Involving a number of high-level Ottoman officials of Kurdish origin, the Society planned the Koçgiri revolt, which it took three months for the state to crush. The revolt was suppressed so brutally that the commander in charge of the repression was eventually dismissed by the Grand National Assembly and called back to Ankara. McDowell describes the revolt in these terms:

In May 1932, Dersim had attracted government attention. Dersim was notoriously defiant. No fewer than eleven military expeditions had tried to quell its inhabitants since 1876. From 1930 onwards, the government began a policy of deportation, disarmament and forced settlement of nomadic tribes in a manner which resembles the operations against Armenians in 1915 to achieve greater control of Dersim. At first, it was piecemeal, but it was clear that the suppression of all Dersim was only a matter of time.²⁷

Tackling Dersim was a prerequisite of the government's articulate "Reform Plan for the East" (*Şark Islahat Planı*), which combined administrative reorganization, including demographic changes, with military repression. In 1935, Dersim was made a province and named Tunceli, literally meaning "the Bronze Hand," connoting the iron fist of the Turkish government and military. A stage of siege was declared in 1936, and a military governor was appointed endowed with extraordinary powers. The military buildup started and in the spring of 1937, the military operations commenced. The Dersim leaders, pleading to be granted self-rule, sent emissaries with a letter to the military governor. In reply, the Tunceli military governor had the emissaries executed. The revenge of Kurds materialized with an ambush that took the lives of ten officers and fifty soldiers. The most respected Alevi cleric of Dersim, septuagenarian Seyyid Rıza, along with seven relatives including his son, were executed in July 1937. Their remains were never recovered.²⁸

The Turkish military, unlike in the case of the Ararat rebellion, wasted no time for in initiating armed operations against the Kurdish insurgents. Over the course of a year, the army units established a strict cordon around Dersim, restricting both locals and outsiders (including journalists) from passing through the mountainous region. The full might of the Turkish armed forces was brought to bear in suppressing the rebellion, an effort that included the use of warplanes and "burning and asphyxiating" chemical bombs. Tens of thousands of people had been killed or deported by the time the armed conflict came to a close in 1938.²⁹

From 1938, the pacification of Dersim, to 1984, the start of the Kurdish insurgency under the leadership of the PKK, the Kurds in Turkey had never taken up arms. The Kurdish issue had submerged into oblivion, and any expression pertinent to Kurds and Kurdishness had sunk into deep silence.

The huge toll of Dersim regarding human life and the immense tragedy that ensued triggered an ongoing debate over whether it was really a Kurdish rebellion in line with those of Sheikh Said and Ararat. While Dersim is treated as a Kurdish rebellion in Turkish military history, the survivor Alevis called it in Zaza the *Tertele Dersim* (Dersim Genocide) and tried to win international acknowledgment. Whether it was just another suppressed Kurdish revolt or a pacification campaign conducted by the Turkish government against the Kurds resulting in enormous human losses, there is a quasi-consensus that it was an untold tragedy, even conceded as such by Tayyip Erdoğan.

The might of the Turkish military reflecting a new and vibrant power may explain the defeat of successive Kurdish revolts in the first 15 years of the Republic, from its foundation until the death of its founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Equally important in explaining the failure of the Kurdish revolts, however, was the societal structure of the Kurds, which involved linguistic and more importantly sectarian divisions among them. The Sheikh Said rebellion had a religious Sunni leadership and a strong Zaza character, while Khoybun, the political organization that initiated the Ararat rebellion, was overwhelmingly Sunni and Kurmanji. The Kurdish rebel forces, consequently, in the Ararat revolt were mostly Kurmanji. Dersim, however, was an Alevi–Zaza affair.

Alevi Kurds, in light of many years of religious persecution at the hands of Sunni Kurds, had no desire to see a rebellion led by an orthodox Sunni sheikh succeed. Religious divisions, in addition to the tribal politics . . . prevailed over a larger sense of Kurdish nationalism, despite the obvious hostility towards Ankara of both Sunni and Alevi Kurdish groups. Twelve years later, Kirmanci Sunni and Zaza Kurds would return the favor by sitting on their hands while another major Alevi Kurdish revolt was crushed in Dersim (1937–1938). Ihsan Nuri's Mount Ararat uprising was crushed in 1930 largely due to a similar failure to overcome divisions within Kurdish society.³⁰

THE FOURTH REVOLT OR THE FIRST ALL-KURDISH INSURGENCY

No Kurdish rebellion in Turkish Republican history has been able to achieve an all-Kurdish character. Deprived of vital international support and legitimacy, the limited scope of each such move and the insurmountable cleavages

dividing groups have made it easier for a Turkish government that had emerged from a successful national struggle (1919–1922) with increased self-confidence. Furthermore, for the battle-tested strong military of Turkey, it was not difficult to suppress the revolts in a determined manner. In ethno-sectarian terms, the Sheikh Said rebellion had a primarily Sunni–Zaza nature while the Ararat revolt had a Sunni–Kurmanji, and Dersim an Alevi–Zaza nature.

The Kurdish question had to wait until the last quarter of the twentieth century to find a vehicle for an insurgency with a bold aim of engulfing every segment of the Kurdish polity and society, and extending its tentacles to Turkey's neighboring countries with Kurdish populations and to the European diaspora where hundreds of thousands of Kurds have been residing.

That vehicle, the PKK, changed all the parameters of the Kurdish issue. It has been an enigma from its very birth and has not changed much in this regard.

NOTES

1. McDowall, *A Modern History*, 200.
2. *Ibid.*, 184.
3. Price, *A History of Turkey*.
4. *Ibid.*
5. The Second Group is the title used for those members of the parliament opposing Mustafa Kemal. Among the names listed, Kâzım Karabekir, Ali Fuad Cebesoy, Rauf Orbay, and Refet Bele were erstwhile comrades of Mustafa Kemal, legendary generals of the Turkish National Struggle (1919–1922). Adnan Adıvar and Halide Edip were among the leading thinkers and public intellectuals of the time.
6. Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1885–1925* (Austin; University of Texas Press, 1991), 123, 124.
7. McDowell, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 196–97.
8. P. B. Kinross, *Atatürk: A Biography of Mustafa Kemal, Father of Modern Turkey* (London: Quill, reissue edition 1964), 407; Walter Reid, *Empire of Sand: How Britain Made the Middle East* (Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd, 2011), 192–93.
9. Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism*, 128.
10. Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2001), 449; H. W. V. Temperley, ed., *A History of the Peace Conference of Paris*, 6 vols. (London, 1920–24), vol. 6, 91.
11. MacMillan, *Paris 1919*, 445.
12. *Ibid.*, 446.
13. Randal, *After Such Knowledge*, 4.
14. David Cuthell, *A Kemalist Gambit: A View of the Political Negotiations in the Determination of the Iraqi-Turkish Border* (Columbia University Press, 2004), 90–91.

15. Cengiz Çandar, *Mezopotamya Ekspresi: Bir Tarih Yolculuğu* [Mesopotamia express: A journey in history] (İstanbul: İletişim, 2012), 509–10 (my translation).
16. Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism*, 99.
17. Ibid., 126.
18. Harriet Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 150.
19. Hamit Bozarslan, *La question kurde. Etats et minorités au Moyen-Orient* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1997).
20. Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 5.
21. Ibid., 16.
22. Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria*, 53–54.
23. Tejel, *Syria's Kurds*, 17.
24. Ibid., 18–19.
25. Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria*, 55.
26. Tejel, *Syria's Kurds*, 19.
27. McDowell, *A Modern History*, 207.
28. Ibid., 208.
29. Ryan Gingeras, *Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Heir to an Empire* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 166–67.
30. David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization, and Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 107.

Chapter 3

The Longest Kurdish Insurgency

On August 15, 1984, at 9:00 p.m., the guerrillas of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, later to be known worldwide by its Kurdish acronym PKK, struck two small towns in the remotest corners of Turkey. One was Şemdinli, situated at the south-easternmost point in Turkey, not much more than a stone's throw away from Iraq and Iran and equidistant to both—that is to say, the Kurdistan region of Iraq and the Kurdistan province of Iran. The other, and militarily speaking more significant, strike was on Eruh, a town in a very mountainous terrain overlooking a deeply gorged river called Botan that flows into the Tigris and was mentioned by Xenophon (ca. 435–355 BC) in his *Anabasis*. The guerrilla forces, each comprised of thirty people, controlled the two small towns for a few hours, distributed their propaganda pamphlets, and, in Eruh, from the loudspeaker of the village mosque they addressed the townspeople and played martial songs in the Kurdish language. They then introduced themselves as the PKK, and declared that they would be back. The local people were told that the liberation struggle of the Kurds had begun.

The casualties for such an audacious attack that may have changed the course of history in Turkey were insignificant: one gendarmerie soldier was killed and six soldiers and three civilians injured in Eruh, and two police officers were shot and one police officer and a soldier were injured in Şemdinli. The PKK squad confiscated 60 weapons in Eruh, loaded them in a van they hijacked, and both squads eventually withdrew from both localities without any casualty on their side.

Turkish state officials initially downplayed the incident. They dubbed what had happened in two very remote townships in southeastern Turkey, with no tremors felt in the rest of the country, as the work of a “bunch of bandits.” Prime Minister Turgut Özal, though cutting his summer vacation short and returning to Ankara to assess the development, resumed his holiday after

just two days. President Kenan Evren, a four-star general, the leader of the military coup of 1980, and the head of the military junta that reigned from 1980 to 1983 until the parliamentary system was restored with a new and restrictive constitution enacted in 1982, made an equally self-confident stance before the public. The bandits would be smashed, if not in weeks, in the upcoming months just like what had happened with similar gangs previously. Any Kurdish military attempt since 1920s was characterized as the work of bandits, as if the Turkish state was confronting an ordinary crime. The ferocity of the crushing of Dersim in 1938 was intended to be an unforgettable lesson administered by the authorities to anyone who might dare to revolt in the predominantly Kurdish areas. Massive deportations, elimination of anything associated with Kurdishness or demands on Kurdish identity, and massacres at different levels were used to intimidate the Kurds into silence, submission, and obedience.¹ It certainly worked—to push the Kurds into submission has become a mission accomplished. For at least three decades, silence prevailed in Turkey's east or Turkish Kurdistan. The quiet years, however, were interrupted suddenly on August 15, 1984.

The two-pronged attack on Eruh and Şemdinli was echoed within days in the nearby Kurdish settlements, causing bigger military casualties. Insurgent violence escalated steadily and severely in the predominantly Kurdish south-east of Turkey.

THE INSURGENCY THAT ENDED THE SILENT DECADES

The silent decades, which were happily presumed to last forever, were over. The Kurdish insurgency was back. “After just over three silent decades, which began in the aftermath of the suppression of the Dersim uprising [there is no consensus among historians whether to call it an uprising or a massacre] in 1938, there were hints of the ‘noisy’ years that were to come.”² However, nobody could predict that a bunch of students at Ankara University, a group of housemates who would move from the capital of Turkey to a small village near Diyarbakır that is spiritually regarded as the capital of Kurdistan, would found a party that would essentially become the biggest and most existential challenge to Turkey. The party that was founded in the village of Fis would be named as the PKK after two years, and within a decade had terminated the silence.

Süleyman Demirel, former President of Turkey (1993 and 2000), qualified the PKK-led insurgency as the twenty-ninth Kurdish rebellion in Turkey's Republican history. He probably referred to the records of the General Staff, which was be the primary actor in charge of Kurdish policies and suppressing

rebellions. However, there had been four major Kurdish armed uprisings properly deserving of the appellation rebellion, in terms of their magnitude. The first three, in 1925, 1930, and 1937, were all led by either religious figures or tribal chieftains. Their suppression by the “Young Republic” took less than a year in each case.³ The Mt. Ararat revolt nominally continued a couple of years but de facto, it took from June 1930 to September 1930 for the Turkish military to quell the revolt. If the Dersim incident is regarded as an uprising, the third and most recent of this grouping, it was over in less than six months and was nonetheless the longest until the rebellion initiated by the PKK in 1984.

WAR FOR DECADES

The PKK-led Kurdish insurgency not only has become the longest ever in Turkey but also has been one of the longest struggles in the world in terms of asymmetric warfare. No armed struggle other than that of the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) in Colombia which lasted from 1964 to 2017 has been sustained longer than the struggle of the PKK.

This fourth and the longest, and geographically the broadest and the most inclusive Kurdish uprising cross-cuts linguistic and sectarian divisions of the Kurdish society and provides a *sui generis* case regarding the history of Kurdish rebellions in Turkey. It, equally, is a unique ideological phenomenon. There have been many rebellions recorded in Kurdish history, each bearing ethnic demands of Kurds to varying degrees. With the PKK-led movement, the Kurdish ethnicity entered into a period of supra-tribal resistance. It has moved toward becoming a national entity, transcending the societal and geographic boundaries of tribal structures.⁴ In the words of Robert Olson, “If the Kurdish nationalist movement was the sore thumb of the Turkish republic after its creation in 1923, it became the Achilles heel of the Turkish state in the 1980s and 1990s.”⁵

The fourth and last Kurdish insurgency in Turkey has political and social ramifications extending far beyond Kurdish and Turkish territories because of the unique and peculiar geopolitical characteristics of Turkey and the Middle East.

Its toll in terms of human casualty and devastation of livelihood, as well as damage to the economy, has been enormous. The figures vary according to different sources, but from the beginning of the PKK’s armed struggle in 1984, in three decades, between 30,000 and 40,000 people are estimated to have been killed. The highest casualty figures belong to 1984–1999 period. The number of people who lost their lives in Turkey’s Kurdish conflict is among the highest on the global scale for such conflicts. The Turkish Ministry

of Defense and military and police sources claimed that “between 1984 and 1999, 5,828 Turkish security officials, 5,390 civilians and 19,786 PKK were killed.”⁶ In a report published in 2009, the casualty figures between 1984 and 2009 were given as 41,828. Citing data provided by the Turkish General Staff, the Gendarmerie High Command, and the General Directorate of Security, during the 26 years of violence, the figure for the dead and wounded climbed to 63,443. In the same report, the estimate of the economic cost of the conflict was given as \$300 billion.⁷ The Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University in Sweden estimated over 30,000 Kurdish fatalities, with the destruction of more than 2,000 villages inhabited by the Kurds in Turkey’s southeast. It provides the number of casualties between 1989 and 2017 as 31,178. Its well-presented data indicate that the highest casualty level was reached during the 1990s. Especially, after 1993, the year of the first PKK cease-fire, the casualty figures suddenly climbed.⁸ Similarly, the upward movement of the casualty figures between 2011 and 2013, and even higher numbers after the year 2015, manifested the correlation between the collapse of the peace processes and the resumption of the war.

The failure of two successive peace processes and with them the collapse of cease-fire, first in 2011 and then in 2015, revived the high casualty figures revealing the cataclysmic nature of the conflict as the prospects for a political settlement faded away. Since the breakdown of a two-and-a-half year cease-fire in July 2015, the PKK conflict in Turkey has entered into one of its deadliest chapters in more than three decades, devastating communities in Turkey’s Kurdish-majority southeast and striking the heart of the country’s largest metropolitan centers. The International Crisis Group has worked to track the rising cost of violence using open-source data, including reports from Turkish-language media, local Kurdish rights groups, and the Turkish military. According to the Group’s casualty tally, updated on October 22, 2019, 4,686 people had been killed in clashes between the security forces and the PKK since July 20, 2015. Of this figure, more than half are PKK militants (2,578), 22.4 percent of whom are female. Around a quarter (1,215) consist of state security force soldiers, including police officers and village guards (ethnically Kurdish paramilitaries who are armed and paid by the Turkish state). There have been 490 civilians confirmed dead, and the remaining 223 are “individuals of unknown affiliation.”⁹

The militant-to-state security force member fatality ratio provides some indication of the Turkish campaign’s impact. Since fighting shifted back into rural areas in July 2016 (after a deadly urban phase between December 2015 and June 2016), the Turkish military has been on the offensive. In the first year, 1.65 PKK militants were killed for each soldier, police officer or village guard; this figure rose to 2.22 in the second year and then to 3.22 in the third. In the last

year, from July 2018 to July 2019, 3.36 PKK militants were killed for each state security force member. . . .

The last year of escalation (2018–2019) saw the highest number of fatalities from Turkish air and land operations against the PKK in northern Iraq since July 2015. Crisis Group could confirm 101 fatalities linked to such operations in that area in 2019, of whom 90 were PKK militants and 11 were Turkish soldiers. According to open-source data collected between May and September 2019, the Turkish army has conducted at least 76 cross-border air operations, most of them targeting PKK hideouts and ammunition depots in and around the Qandil mountains where the PKK's "headquarters" are located. . . .

With the stated goal of "ending the PKK," the Turkish military launched air and ground offensives against the militants in northern Iraq (dubbed Operation Claw) on 27 May 2019. In a first since 2008, Turkish ground forces penetrated around 20km deep into Iraqi territory to clear out militants, cut off logistical routes and destroy ammunition depots. The Turkish military also created new security outposts. . . .

Besides the higher-ranking PKK militant fatalities, Crisis Group data on PKK militants killed in Turkey and northern Iraq between July 2018 and July 2019 (a total of 361) shows that around 8.5 per cent (31) were from western Iran, around twice the number in the same period of the previous year. . . . This data suggests that the PKK is compensating for the manpower shortage in its insurgency against Turkey by bringing in more cadres from Iran. It also means that the pool of recruits the PKK can draw on in its insurgency against Turkey goes beyond Turkey's borders.¹⁰

Almost 1,000 deaths were confirmed during the July 2011 to December 2012 escalation in the aftermath of the failure of the Oslo Process.

The ICG had evaluated the economic cost of Turkey's war with the Kurds back in 2011 at an estimated \$300 billion to \$450 billion.¹¹ Since then, especially after the failed peace efforts and the war against Kurds extending into Syrian territories, the estimated cost is at least triple what it was in 2011. Compared with the violence related to the Northern Ireland conflict that claimed 3,569 lives between 1969 and 2010, the death toll resulting from Turkey's Kurdish issue between 2011 and 2017 is higher for a much shorter period of time.

URBAN WARFARE FAILED

Resumption of the war following the failure of the peace process witnessed a great devastation of major Kurdish towns, such as Cizre, Nusaybin, Şırnak, and Sur (the old city of Diyarbakır), alongside enormous casualty. This was

unprecedented in the long history of the Kurdish conflict. From post-November 2015 until early summer 2016, those towns, renowned for their pro-PKK stance and support for the HDP, were subjected to repression and ruthless social engineering. The inhabitants were forced to leave their destroyed homes. In February 2017, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights issued a report on the human rights situation in southeast Turkey between July 2015 and December 2016. According to the report, during that period, some 2,000 people were killed in the scope of security operations, of whom 800 were members of the security forces and approximately 1,200 were residents. The report estimated that between 355,000 to half a million people, mainly Turkish citizens of Kurdish origin, were turned into internally displaced persons.

Some observers put the blame on the PKK's ill-planned and ill-executed urban uprisings. Whatever the underlying truth may be, the heavy-handed response of Turkish security forces was real. It turned the Kurdish towns and settlements that sympathized with the PKK and pro-Kurdish parties into ghost towns, pacified the Kurdish resistance in Turkey and deprived, albeit in relative terms, the Syrian Kurdish struggle of formidable support. If the casualties of the Yekîneyên Parastina Gel -The People's Protection Units -(YPG) fighters and the Kurdish citizens who lost their lives in Turkey's military operation in Afrin between January and March of 2018 are included, the aforementioned figures would swell significantly.

PKK'S TREPIDATION: THE SRI LANKAN MODEL

The PKK leaders and their followers allege that the destruction of the Kurdish towns in 2015 and 2016 is the implementation of a "Crush Plan" (*Çökertme Planı* in Turkish). Although the allegation has not been substantiated, they fervently believe in the existence of such a plan, which (again allegedly) was a decision taken in October 2014 by Turkey's National Security Council chaired by the president and brings together the highest civilian and military officials in charge of security. Therefore, according to the PKK leadership, ending the peace process in July 2015 and the resumption of the war by Turkey were both premeditated. Since the failure of the peace process, there has been an abundance of references to the "Crush Plan" by the PKK and the pro-Kurdish HDP officials, as well as pro-Kurdish columnists and reporters in the media.

In the Crush Plan, the PKK leaders see the implementation of the "Sri Lanka Model." They have a firm belief, almost an obsession, that Turkey is committed to repeating the Sri Lankan example in finishing off the PKK-led Kurdish armed struggle. In Sri Lanka, the armed struggle that was initiated

by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), commonly known as the Tamil Tigers, and that ran from 1983 to 2009 ended when the Tigers were eventually defeated by the government forces.

The PKK literature attests to implementation of the “Sri Lankan Model” by the Turkish army against the Kurdish movement long before 2015. It was alleged that

when the winter months were reached, in line with the operations executed in the urban centers that amount to a political genocide, the annihilation plan against the guerrilla movement was put into force. The Turkish army, like the Sri Lankan state that had crushed the Tamil Tigers with genocide, was planning to annihilate the Kurdish movement during the winter of 2011–2012.¹²

The possibility of the Turkish government being inspired by the Sri Lankan experience aside, there are many parallels between the PKK and the Tamil Tigers that could indeed create concern among the leaders of the former. The Tamil Tigers were founded in 1976, and the PKK two years later, in 1978. The Tigers started their armed struggle in 1983, and the PKK a year later, in 1984. While the Tigers were involved in four unsuccessful rounds of peace talks with the Sri Lankan government throughout the conflict, the PKK was involved in two, with many unilateral declarations of cease-fire and contacts established with PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. Both had legendary, almost mythical founders. The founder of the Tigers, Vellupillai Prabhakaran, was six years younger than Öcalan. He was reportedly killed in the last battle with the Sri Lankan army in May 2009. Prabhakaran’s grip on his organization was very similar to that of the PKK leader. There were also some specific similarities in the ideological outlook of the two organizations that were historically peers.

The LTTE, like the FARC in Colombia, and different from the PKK, has been able to control vast swathes of territory during the conflict. In 2000, in the Tamil-inhabited areas of northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka, the LTTE was in control of 76 percent of the landmass. In 2002, it had control over 15,000 square kilometers. Such military success on the part of the Tigers led the majority of analysts to consider that the war was unwinnable by the Sri Lankan government forces. In 2000, in the Tamil-inhabited areas of northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka, the LTTE was in control of 76 percent of the landmass. In 2002, it had control over 15,000 square kilometers. Such military success on the part of the Tigers led the majority of analysts to consider that the war was unwinnable by the Sri Lankan government forces. However, President Mahinda Rajapaksa and the Defense Minister Gotabaya Rajapaksa, his brother, invented the “Rajapaksa Model” in dealing with the LTTE. It required unwavering political will: disregarding international

opinion, no negotiations were to be made; control of information was essential; there would be no reconciliatory political intervention; and complete operational freedom would be provided to the security forces. Eventually, the Sri Lankan army moved toward the Tamil Tigers who were driven back into a marshy area at the northeastern tip of the island at Nandikadal Lagoon, brutally finished the job.¹³ The Tamil insurgency was ended.

On the one hand, the Tamil leadership, and more than anybody else the Tigers' supreme leader Prabhakaran should take the blame for the disaster. "Prabhakaran was suffering from hubris. He believed his own propaganda that the Tamils were a de facto state and impossible to defeat on the battlefield,"¹⁴ wrote Jonathan Powell in his magnum opus, *Talking to Terrorists: How to End Armed Conflicts*.

Prabhakaran's overconfidence, perhaps, was not much different from that of Murat Karayılan, the PKK's top military commander. Karayılan's mindset is reflected in the last section of his 500-page work, *Bir Savaşın Anatomisi: Kürdistan'da Askeri Çizgi* (The anatomy of a war: The military line in Kurdistan), the most comprehensive analytical narrative of the PKK's armed struggle from 1984 to 2010. The top military commander of the PKK, and equally a political leader at the highest level, wrote:

The people and the guerrilla have become the significant pillars of the combat in that they complement and support each other in the developing struggle of popular resistance. For the modern, professional guerrilla that relies on its people, enjoys its moral and material support, and maintains its qualitative growth on the basis of legitimate self-defense, it is impossible to retract against a conventional army. No matter what technologically most advanced arms and tools they use, the guerrilla that rests on the people in Kurdistan, and on the immense geography of Kurdistan, is invincible. The strategic ally of the guerrilla is the geography of Kurdistan and its mountains!¹⁵

With the devastation in 2015 and 2016, Cizre, Nusaybin, Şırnak, Yüksekova (Gever), and Sur (the old city of Diyarbakır)—towns once considered the bastions of the pro-PKK activism, and the principal recruiting grounds of the PKK—suffered huge losses of life, mostly youth and teenagers. With the displacement of tens of thousands of residents in 2015 and 2016, the confidence expressed by Karayılan did not appear very accurate. The government forces were ruthless in these towns. Waves of repressive measures followed the military operations. The urban resistance performed by the pro-PKK youth in the Kurdish towns, who dug trenches and tunnels, could not hold against the military onslaught and the operations of special police units. After the towns were pacified through harsh military operations, and especially after the botched military coup of July 2016, repressive measures continued in effect

all across the Kurdish regions in southeastern Turkey. Around 100 mayors were purged, detained, and arrested. The trustees sent from Ankara took over control of the municipalities, and all Kurdish signs and memorabilia in the region were banned and removed. The Kurdish people were traumatized and subdued. The oppressive policies of the government seemed to have worked.

DISTANT COUSINS: PKK, LTTE, FARC

Such had certainly been the case in extinguishing the fire of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka. Jonathan Powell wrote this about the military victory of the Sri Lankan government and the disastrous defeat of the Tamils:

While the methods used by Rajapaksas are not available in a conventional democracy, it is of course possible for an autocracy to defeat an armed group by extreme violence and the suppression of all rights, at least temporarily.¹⁶

Powell nevertheless added that unless the root causes of the insurgency are resolved or the grievances that led to the armed insurrection are addressed, the underlying problems would reappear and thus the rebellion. Syria is a striking case in point. In 1982, Hafez al-Assad suppressed the Sunni uprising in Hama with extreme violence, killing between 10,000 and 40,000 people. At the time it was seen as a success, but about 30 years later the rebellion reappeared, casting dark clouds for the survival of Syria as a sovereign state.

What has been achieved by the defeat of the LTTE insurgency may not be the ultimate resolution of the Tamil problem and violence may resume its grip on Sri Lanka in the future. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that many countries facing an ethnic and separatist insurgency feel encouraged by the success of the military in the resolution of the Tamil problem. Thus, the worries of the PKK leaders about the possible Turkish course of action had some rationale. The devastation of the Kurdish towns led the Kurdish leaders to accuse the Turkish government of introducing the “Sri Lankan Model.” Reference was also made to the alleged “Crush Plan.” For the PKK, both were synonymous.

Moreover, the PKK never enjoyed the military successes of the LTTE and the FARC in terms of creating liberated zones. The Sri Lankan (or the Tamil) experience illustrated that holding large swathes of territory and achieving liberated zones cannot be sustainable and perceived as a permanent solution unless it is translated into the political resolution of the underlying problem. With less military might than peers like the LTTE and FARC, it is understandable that the PKK felt even more vulnerable against Turkey’s military offensive.

Murat Karayılan dispelled any notion that his organization would repeat the mistakes made by the Tamil Tigers. He was aware of the Tamil blunder at Nandikadal Lagoon. For Karayılan, from the purely military point of view, what the Tamil Tigers committed at the Lagoon was suicide.

In the only document on the PKK's military doctrine, penned by Karayılan, it is asserted that the PKK also enjoyed liberated zones, albeit different from those controlled by the LTTE and FARC. The zones termed "Media defense zones"¹⁷ in Karayılan's book are not liberated zones in the traditional sense, yet they represent one of the three main operational paths developed by the PKK.

In the military doctrine of the PKK formulated by Karayılan with reference to the teachings of Abdullah Öcalan, priority is given to ideology, which renders the PKK's fighting force fundamentally political rather than military. Thus, the doctrine is entitled the "legitimate defense strategy." It prioritizes defense rather than offensives to be performed against the defined "enemy." Accordingly, in the "new era," it is stipulated that the legitimate defense strategy doctrine be implemented along three distinct operational paths. In the PKK literature, the Media defense zones to be dominated by the PKK guerrillas constitute a rugged territory of high mountains that stretch from the point where the Turkish, Iranian, and Iraqi borders intersect in the east, near the Iraqi Kurdish town of Zakho across the frontier with Turkey, to the right bank of the River Khabur on the west. The area is a territory almost 180



Figure 3.1 Author with Murat Karayılan, the Top Commander of the PKK on Mt. Qandil, Iraqı Kurdistan's Border with Iranian Kurdistan. Discussing the PKK's fighting tactics and its conditions to "leave the mountain" and disarm. *Source:* Author's Personal Archive.

kilometers long and on average 15 to 20 kilometers wide extending along the Turkey-Iraq frontier. In time, the Turkish armed forces established military bases in the same area to confront the PKK, thereby extending the war into Iraqi Kurdish territory as well.

Karayılan distinguished the second operational component of the “legitimate defense strategy” as the “guerrilla areas,” defined as areas where “the enemy” could enter, but the mobile PKK guerrilla would effectively employ a range of military tactics including rapid movement, and hit-and-run. The objective is, ultimately, to transform those areas into Media defense zones. The third component is the city, the plain, and the metropolitan urban centers.¹⁸

TOP COMMANDER ON THE MILITARY SITUATION AND ROJAVA

What the Kurdish towns went through in 2015 and 2016 would seemingly fit in the third component of the PKK’s “legitimate defense strategy,” although the organization never acknowledged its direct role in the events. However, during late 2015 and early 2016, while the Kurdish towns and most notably, the old city of Diyarbakır were besieged by the Turkish government forces and under curfew, the PKK leaders were of the opinion that the resentment of the people would be temporary. According to them, when the PKK had launched its armed struggle in 1984, for almost everybody, including the critical mass of the Kurdish people of Turkey, it was merely the adventurism of a bunch of reckless youngsters. After a while, though, those same people became its ardent supporters that infused life into the PKK and maintained its longevity. The hopeless beginning in the eyes of the people gradually transformed into hope, an inspiration that the Kurdish goals could be achieved. Therefore, the reasoning went, the Kurdish inhabitants of those heavily destroyed urban centers, following such a traumatic period, would come to support the PKK, as they always did. That was what the message of the PKK leaders in Mt. Qandil conveyed to the concerned HDP officials. I was one of those who were privy to hear the assessment attributed to the PKK leadership during my visit to Diyarbakır in March 2016, when fighting in its old city, Sur, was ongoing.

In December 2016, in one of the mountain redoubts of the Media defense zones, following the brutal suppression of the “trench warfare”—as it has been termed—waged by pro-PKK youth, that devastated the strongholds of the PKK and the most solid constituencies of the HDP, I queried Murat Karayılan about the PKK’s alleged military mistakes, its plight, and the disappointment of the Kurdish people in Turkey. The Kurds, specifically

those erstwhile staunch supporters, were critical of the military line the PKK adopted in the urban centers that brought unprecedented destruction.

Karayılan ruled out any heavy PKK involvement in the military sense regarding the “trench warfare.” According to him, it was inborn and “home-made,” and was perpetrated by the restive youth of the towns who defied the central rule of Ankara. So to Karayılan, the action was not premeditated, and although the PKK politically endorsed what he saw as a “rightful resistance” of the Kurds, militarily the PKK’s engagement was minimal. The trained PKK cadres sent to assist the rebellious youth in the towns mentioned were able to withdraw without casualties. Only in Sur, at the heart of Diyarbakır, he conceded that the PKK incurred losses during the last days of the fight.

Our talk occurred before the liberation of the Syrian provincial center, the city of Raqqa, which was then used as the capital of the Islamic State (ISIS). The war to liberate Mosul had just been launched, and while the Iraqi army—the People’s Mobilization Forces formed with the fatwa of the highest Shiite authority of jurisdiction, Grand Ayatollah Sistani—and the Peshmerga of the KRG-Iraq, under heavy American air support, were closing in on Mosul, the highest military authority of the PKK had focused on the evolving military situation concerning Raqqa. American military cooperation for the liberation of Raqqa was with the Syrian Democratic Forces, whose backbone was no other than the Kurdish YPG. Karayılan told me that the Kurds militarily control about 25 percent of the territory of Syria where they have been enjoying, with the other ethnic groups, a kind of self-rule. Following the liberation of Raqqa, it would extend to 40 percent of the Syrian territory. It would be very difficult to dismantle the structures that they have been sharing power with, mainly the Arabs and the Christian minorities in the region. Less than a year after my talk with Karayılan on the Syrian situation, The Syrian Democratic Forces, under American air support, declared the liberation of Raqqa, the sixth largest city of Syria, after a lengthy battle that destroyed most of the city, in October 2017.

TURKEY’S REPRESSION: BACK TO SQUARE ONE

In the aftermath of the massive destruction of the Kurdish strongholds in Turkey’s southeast in the first quarter of 2016 and the repression of pro-Kurdish political activists in the wake of the collapse of the peace process in July 2015, the botched coup of July 2016 had enormous effect on the Kurdish issue. The pro-Kurdish HDP, with the third largest caucus in Turkey’s parliament, passed through an ordeal. From July 2015 to February 2018, 11,631 of its members were detained, 3,382 of whom were then arrested; this, among the registered 37,551 party members. According to the figures, then, one out

of every three HDP members has been subjected to repressive measures.¹⁹ Its nationally popular, charismatic leader Selahattin Demirtaş was sent to jail in November 2016. Fifty-five MPs out of 59 belonging the HDP have been on trial, while seven have been stripped of their titles and nine more arrested. From July 2015 to March 2018, 43 co-chairs of the provincial party organizations and 101 co-chairs of the district branches were put behind bars. Ninety-four out of the 102 municipalities run by the HDP's sister organization DBP (Demokratik Bölgeler Partisi—Democratic Regions Party) in the Kurdish-inhabited southeast and eastern parts of Turkey were taken over by the government, 55 co-mayors were put in prison, and trustees from Ankara were appointed to replace the elected mayors.²⁰ Many leading figures of the Kurdish struggle in Turkey, ranging from members of parliaments to opinion leaders in the Kurdish-inhabited regions and civil rights defenders, left the country for a self-imposed exile mainly to Europe, scattering in various countries. Consequently, the HDP and DBP were crippled, and the once-defiant Kurdish citizens of Turkey were to a large extent subdued under harsh and oppressive government policies.

The Kurdish movement in Turkey, after the end of the peace process in July 2015 and especially after July 2016, took a very heavy blow. The PKK was engaged in an intense debate on what went wrong. Although no real self-criticism was made in public by the PKK, one did hear that it is the debating the debacle.

Notwithstanding the heavy losses suffered and the big blow on the Kurdish movement in Turkey, the insurgency represented by the PKK is far from being extinguished in Turkey. Preserving its armed presence beyond Turkey's borders with a leadership at large, the PKK survives.²¹

In the eyes of Turkish generals, the danger of Turkey being partitioning through the armed struggle of the PKK had been averted. However, the PKK was not sufficiently defeated. During his presidency (2007–2014), Abdullah Gül informed me of this particular outlook on the part of the military top brass. In November 2002 when he had formed the government as the prime minister, the military leaders briefed him on the security situation of the country and conceded in dismay that the PKK had it moved its fighters to the territory of Iraq and survived. Therefore, they considered the PKK undefeated.

A similar appraisal was given to me by the Chief-of-Staff General İlker Başbuğ, in 2008, when he invited me to exchange views on the Kurdish question. To my surprise, he was not a maximalist in his assessment about the destruction of the PKK. He told me no illusions should be harbored about the thorough destruction of the PKK. To contain the “terrorist organization” at acceptable levels would be enough. Turkey could live with a contained PKK, which would be removed from constituting an existential threat to the country. However, unless the armed forces of the PKK were deprived of their refuge beyond the frontier and thus their operational capabilities, they

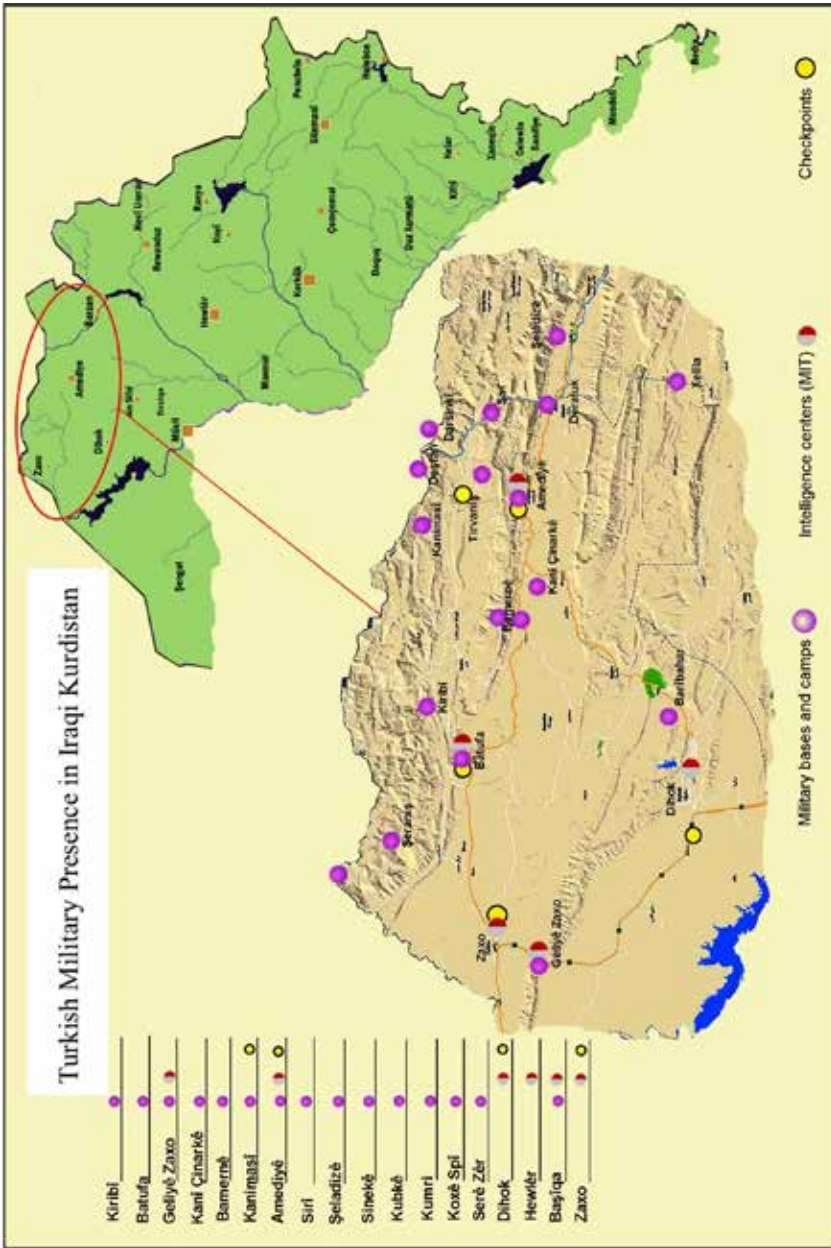


Figure 3.2 Turkish Military Presence in Iraqi Kurdistan (where the PKK also operates militarily, and names the area “Media defense zones”). Source: Map provided to the author by Kurdish sources.

would remain undefeated. For General Başbuğ, as long as a guerrilla movement enjoys a territorial base in a neighboring country, similar to the North-South Vietnam case, it will be undefeatable. The dictum attributed to Henry Kissinger, “The guerrilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win,” became valid for Turkey’s Kurdish case, as well.

Turkey’s peace processes during the first two decades of the 2000s had failed. The military stood poised for the unfinished job. From 2016 on, it started to fight for winning on a much wider battlefield, including the territory of Syria.

Turkey was back to its factory settings vis-à-vis the Kurdish question, in a war that had begun in the 1920s.

NOTES

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11. International Crisis Group, *Turkey, The PKK and the Kurdish Settlement* (2011). <http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/europe/turkey-cyprus/turkey/219-turkey-the-pkk-and-a-kurdish-settlement>.

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13. Jonathan Powell, *Talking to Terrorists: How to End Armed Conflicts* (London: The Bodley Head, 2014), 36–39.
14. *Ibid.*, 38.
15. Murat Karayılan, *Bir Savaşın Anatomisi: Kürdistan'da Askeri Çizgi*, 2nd ed. (Neuss: Mezopotamya Yayınları, August 2011), 500.
16. Powell, *Talking to Terrorists*, 39.
17. Media is the name given to the area comprising today's mountainous north-western Iran, and the northeastern and eastern parts of Mesopotamia where the Medes lived and established their rule between 800 BC and 700 BC. According to the current Kurdish nationalist discourse, the Medes are the forefathers of the Kurds.
18. Karayılan, *Bir Savaşın Anatomisi*, 459–60.
19. Ahval, "One in Three HDP Members Detained in Over Last 3 Years," March 10, 2018. <https://ahvalnews.com/hdp/one-three-hdp-members-detained-over-last-3-years>, March 10, 2018.
20. Human Rights Watch World Report 2018, *Turkey Events of 2017*, 2018. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/turkey>.
21. On November 6, 2018, the United States put a bounty on three senior leaders of the PKK. The State Department has authorized rewards for information leading to the identification or location of Murat Karayılan (up to \$5 million), Cemil Bayık (up to \$4 million), and Duran Kalkan (up to \$3 million). The announcement made reference to the fact that in 1997, the US Department of State had designated the PKK as a foreign terrorist organization under section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act and in 2001, the US government designated the PKK as a Specially Designated and Global Terrorist Entity pursuant to Executive Order 13224. The profile photos of Murat Karayılan, Cemil Bayık, and Duran Kalkan were placed at the top of the "most wanted terrorists" list, which included the Islamic State (ISIS), al-Qaeda, and various Salafi/jihadi organizations' leaders. The American decision was generally interpreted as an appeasement policy to Turkey to soften its belligerent attitude to American alignment with the Kurds, that is, the YPG in northern Syria. It was seen as an American attempt to separate the PYD/YPG from the PKK.

Chapter 4

Öcalan and the Birth and Evolution of the PKK

“What do you think of Abdullah Öcalan?” the interior minister asked me. It was December 2010, and I was conveying my impressions on my return from the PKK headquarters on Mt. Qandil where I had interviewed the rebel leaders for the report I was working on: the decommissioning of the PKK. Beşir Atalay and I were in a weird ambiance, a candlelit dinner overlooking the breathtaking beauty of the Bosphorus in İstanbul, at odds with the substance of the issue we were discussing.

My response was brief: “A genial mind!”

The minister did not look baffled at my answer, but replied calmly, “You know what, I assigned two different groups of academicians to survey this man scientifically, and one of the findings came out exactly as you qualified him right now—and the other team’s findings were just the opposite. They concluded that he is an idiot.”

I responded jokingly. “If I were you Mr. Minister,” I said, “even if the second assessment is true, I would go for the first one. If your efforts do not bring any results, at least you can blame him that he deceived you and he is not true to his promises. But if he is an idiot, how can you explain that he has played a cat and mouse game with so many governments, including the one that you are serving as a minister? It is not dignified for anybody to be toyed with by an idiot!”

Beşir Atalay, Turkey’s interior minister between 2007 and 2011, was in charge of the “Kurdish file.” In 2009, he was given the title of “Coordinator of the Kurdish Opening,” a government project to seek a political settlement for the problem, but that was derailed within three months of being launched. It was one of those beginnings to which dashed hopes are attached shortly after. Atalay had invited a number of journalists and academicians to a workshop in Ankara that marked the inauguration of the ill-fated Kurdish opening.

Before the formal opening of the workshop, he had invited me to his office in the ministry, asking me whether I had anything to tell him in private that I would decline to speak of in front of the others. I had known him from the days when he was a humble academic in a provincial university. We had been to Iran on the third anniversary of the revolution upon the invitation of the Iranian authorities in 1982, and we had developed a relationship based on mutual trust. That was perhaps the reason for the improper audacity of my reply.

Perhaps also, in my subconscious, I was under the influence of the conversation I just had with Abdullah Öcalan's younger brother Osman. On my way back from Mt. Qandil, I had interviewed the leaders of a breakaway faction of the PKK. In the Iraqi Kurdish town of Koysanjak, I had spoken with Osman Öcalan, who along with others had left the PKK in 2004 and was marked as a traitor by his elder brother. Notwithstanding the impossibility of reconciliation between the two brothers, the younger Öcalan spoke of his elder with great admiration concerning his intellect:

The Turkish state lost time, without trying to understand who he was, in attempting to discredit Abdullah Öcalan, called him a murderer, a foremost terrorist, etc. If instead they seriously had tried to understand him, we, the Turks, the Kurds, the state, everyone, everything would be better off now. Abdullah Öcalan is one of the two Kurds in the twentieth century to influence millions of Kurds who would outlive him. He is a philosopher. From his childhood, he has been an avid reader of books, a real savant, a genius.

Abdullah Öcalan has always been a controversial name, but simultaneously, beyond doubt, he is one of those rare figures who can generate the two most opposing appraisals about his personality and politics. He is also another vivid case exemplifying the tremendous roles played by certain individuals in determining the destiny of millions. Without knowing, understanding, and accurately assessing Abdullah Öcalan, it is almost impossible to grasp or to decipher the PKK. The name Öcalan is synonymous with the PKK. He almost singlehandedly laid the groundwork for the PKK and, at every stage for more than 40 years, has undertaken its establishment and development, and determined its strategic objectives and tactical positions.

The eldest of seven children, from an extremely humble rural background, Öcalan was born in the Ömerli village of Halfeti, a district on the eastern bank of the Euphrates near Turkey's frontier with Syria. His exact birthdate is not known. It is usually estimated as 1948 or 1949. His childhood companions, schoolmates, and teachers remember him as a bright pupil at the elementary school. Not much is known about his adolescent years until he managed to study at the law school in İstanbul and ended up at the School of Political

Sciences of Ankara University, which had a reputation as the institutional source for generations of Turkey's ruling elite. Although Öcalan was not able to finish his studies and become an alumnus of the School of Political Sciences, this was largely because the school at that point was a hotbed of leftist student activism. Öcalan's education was interrupted in 1972, when he was arrested for his involvement in politics. While the School of Political Sciences did not become Öcalan's alma mater, the seeds of the PKK were sown there, and it was in Ankara that Öcalan gathered his inner circle of students. That circle, whose central and leading figure was Öcalan, would culminate in the PKK.

As the foremost founder of the PKK, Öcalan modeled it on a pseudo-Leninist format according to the ideological tendency he ascribed to during that period. He then assumed the title of Secretary-General of the organization in 1978, the formal date of its foundation, and acted in this capacity until the third Congress held in 1986, when he was titled as the party's Leadership. The title did not suggest any plurality concerning the party executive or a board. The Leadership was nothing more than the persona of Abdullah Öcalan. He was revered by party cadres as if he was a supra-human being, and rather than an individual, he was seen as an institution. He was in fact called "Leadership" without his name being pronounced. When, in discernible esteem, the word "Leadership" was uttered, it was synonymously a reference to Abdullah Öcalan. Almost a decade later, in 1995, his title changed to "Party President." In the ninth Congress, which is called the reconstruction congress and was held while Öcalan was serving a term of aggravated life imprisonment on a Turkish prison-island, the re-founded PKK party structure consisted of Party Leadership, a Congress, two Co-Presidents (each of a different gender), a Party Council, an Executive Committee, a Disciplinary Board, and other Committees. Thus, the title of Party Leadership was reinstated and defined as the party's central theoretical-ideological institution that determined the Party's philosophy, ethics, politics, and strategy, a function to be fulfilled by Abdullah Öcalan.¹ The role and power attributed to the title "Leadership," designed to be fulfilled only by Öcalan, has the hallmark of Velayet-i Faqih, the institution enshrined in the constitution of Iran after the Islamic Revolution. Velayet-i Faqih was empowered by jurisprudence as the supreme political authority, personified by Khomeini, the guide of the Revolution.

From the year 2006 on, the apotheosis of Öcalan achieved a further level. The PKK circles started to call him *Kürt Halk Önderi* (The Kurdish People's Leader). This was the outcome of a signature campaign that began in August 2005 with the slogan "Öcalan is our political will" conducted in the vast geography where Kurds live in Europe and the Middle East. When the campaign ended in October 2006, 3,243 million signatures had been collected, 2.04 million of them in Turkey.²

PERSONALITY CULT

In 2011, during the hopeful days for a political settlement of the Kurdish conflict, while I was preparing my report on the decommissioning of the PKK entitled “‘Leaving the Mountain’: How May the PKK Lay Down Arms?” I interviewed almost all of the government officials and the prominent PKK and non-PKK Kurdish personalities. Among them, Hakan Fidan, the Head of Turkish Intelligence Agency (MİT), who was in charge of secret contacts with the PKK on behalf of Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan and who used to visit Öcalan regularly on his prison-island, shared his intriguing observation with me. “In the PKK,” he said, “unbelievably, everyone has delegated the power to think, namely to develop the theoretical framework, to Abdullah Öcalan.” Throughout the years, Öcalan had masterfully created a “cult of personality.”³ The leaders of a breakaway faction of the PKK that created the most serious threat to the survival of the organization had told me, “There is no number two, three, or four in the PKK after Öcalan. There is no one else, even if you count up to a hundred.” These leaders had held the highest military positions in the PKK until the split in 2004. With Abdullah Öcalan’s brother Osman Öcalan, they left the PKK and established (without the younger Öcalan) a rival party, *Party Welatpêrez Demokrat* (Patriotic Democrat Party). During my encounter with them in Erbil, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, I became privy to information about the inner workings of the PKK. I was told that the “personality cult” started in 1990, and founders like Cemil Bayık and Ali Haydar Kaytan played a considerable role by developing its discourse. Bayık and Kaytan belonged to the first circle around Abdullah Öcalan when they embarked on the road as early as 1973, when they were all students at the University of Ankara. For Kaytan, reflecting the sentiments of many PKK militants, Abdullah Öcalan is far beyond a leader and instead is like a saint, a prophet, and most certainly a great mind:

When I focus on the power of thought, I start thinking about prophets. It is the same with our Leadership [Abdullah Öcalan]. . . . Everything we know, we have heard from him. . . . We all went after his thoughts. We went to embrace his opinions. He is the one who also takes others’ opinions. . . . Of course there are others who also contribute. But in the end, we join him. . . . In other words, in the end, he was our natural leader. Awesome! . . . Whatever you are seeking for, he possesses it. . . . For me, Leader Apo is the crowned personality of Eastern thought. He is a synthesis. He takes as a basis the thoughts of the great sages of the East representing the truth. . . . He is the summit of the power of thought of these lands.⁴

M. Can Yüce, an early member of the PKK who later became the mortal enemy of Öcalan after a profound disillusionment about him because of his

performance in the Turkish courtrooms following his capture in 1999, had written, in prison, a biography of the PKK leader. Yüce was caught in 1980 and was imprisoned for two decades. Despite his later defection, his book about Abdullah Öcalan and the history of the PKK entitled *Doğu'da Yükselen Güneş* (The Sun Rising in the East) has a special place in the PKK literature for exalting Öcalan. In praise of Öcalan, he wrote:

No wonder the land of Kurdistan is called the “Land of the Sun.” The land of the sun could not carry on without its sun any longer. It had been waiting for too long, it suffered endless agonies and went through many tragedies, but in the end, it met its Sun. Due to all these reasons, we think that the East and the Sun constitute the image that best explains the reality of Abdullah Öcalan.⁵

Likening Öcalan to the sun inspired some astute academics who analyzed the PKK. “As the members and sympathizers of the PKK refer to Abdullah Öcalan as a sun (*güneş*), we may develop this analogy and compare the organization of the party-complex as a planetary system,” wrote two such PKK researchers who portrayed the PKK, its various institutions, and guerrilla forces as planets in orbit around a sun—Abdullah Öcalan.⁶

The personality cult of Öcalan within the organizational ranks of the PKK can help but not entirely to understand the stunning mass appeal that he possesses among Kurds. His saga, from October 1998 when he was forced to leave Syria where he had lived for twenty years until his delivery in February 1999 in Kenya to Turkish authorities, attests to this fact. The quasi-consensus was that Öcalan was handed over to the Turks by a joint international intelligence undertaking that was primarily the work of the Americans, that is, the CIA. From the day of Öcalan's arrival at Rome airport (November 12) onward, widespread mass hunger strikes took place in 147 Kurdish associations throughout European, Scandinavian, Caucasian, and Middle Eastern countries, and to a considerable extent in Russia, the United States, Canada, and Australia. Much more striking was that from October 1998 to February 1999—that is, within the space of four months—seventy-five people set themselves on fire across the world, to protest what was framed as “an international plot against Öcalan,” and fifteen of those burned did not survive. Among them were an eleven-year-old schoolgirl from the Kurdistan region of Iran and a fifty-six-year-old housewife from İstanbul.

WHY ÖCALAN?

The passion of many Turkish Kurds for Öcalan was not easy for the Iraqi Kurdish leaders to fathom or digest. They knew him well and were very

disappointed because of his conduct at the Turkish tribunal during his trial in 1999. Iraqi Kurdish leaders had an impressive track record built upon years of armed struggle waged in the mountains of Kurdistan. In contrast, Abdullah Öcalan has never carried a gun or taken part in any military action. His Iraqi kin with so many stories of prowess associated with their names saw a coward in the PKK leader, but were equally puzzled at seeing him rise like a phoenix from his prison cell, enjoying immense popularity among the Kurdish masses.

In the eyes of his loyalists, Öcalan's defense in the tribunal was, at the least, a shrewd political maneuver to preserve the PKK and the Kurdish struggle intact, and at the most, a brilliant display of his wisdom and vast knowledge which should be a source of pride for Kurds. It was however taken very differently by his opponents, rivals, and critics. Nevertheless, even to some of his loyalists who were shaken in disbelief, it was traumatic and shocking. They felt left out by the PKK, in profound grief and disappointment. For some, it was nothing but betrayal. I myself heard from Masoud Barzani, the Kurdish national leader who was elected as the first President of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in 2005, that Öcalan's trial performance was disgraceful. A year before his election as the president of Iraq, Mam Jalal Talabani, conversing with me during a private visit to İstanbul had said that he was puzzled and could not understand how Turkey's Kurds, who are considered by the rest of their kin in the Middle East as the most advanced, could so blindly follow a person like Abdullah Öcalan. Referring to Öcalan's compromising attitude in the Turkish court, he asked: "Can't they see how undignified he was?" He inquired whether I had an explanation for it all.

I had, and Mam Jalal was satisfied with my response. I told him that the millions of Kurds in Turkey saw in Abdullah Öcalan a challenge to the Turkish state that has denied their identity and suppressed them. More importantly, in his captivity, he personified the Kurds of Turkey, who in return identified with him and felt just like pious Christians did toward Jesus Christ.

Moreover, unlike the previous leaders of Kurdish rebellions who disappeared leaving no trace, Abdullah Öcalan, albeit in prison, remained alive and unblemished. Even though he was behind bars, his presence assuaged his loyalists. They knew where he was and there has been no vacuum for the leadership of the Kurds.

An equally important but not publicly conceded fact was that the PKK, despite Öcalan's capture—that is to say, with its head chopped off—remained intact. Whereas previous Kurdish rebellions had been crushed entirely, in the eyes of the Turkish generals as long as the PKK survived, with its structure and its guns, and despite the imprisonment of its leader, the aspirations of several million Kurds continued unsuppressed.

Besides, none of the successive Kurdish rebellions in Turkey's Republican history had been able to assemble the vast support that the PKK enjoyed from Kurdish ethnicity. In addition, the PKK has spread beyond Turkey to the extent that it could mobilize tens of thousands of people in festivals across Europe and mainly in Germany where the scattered Kurdish population is estimated to be between half a million and a million. The PKK's surrogates or PKK-affiliated Kurdish parties emerged over time in Iraqi, Iranian, and Syrian parts of Kurdistan, elevating the PKK itself to the status of formidable pan-Kurdish organization and a considerable rival to the traditional and conservative pan-Kurdish movement represented mainly by the Kurdistan Democrat Party of Iraq under the leadership of the Barzani dynasty.

PKK: BORN IN ANKARA UNIVERSITY, DESCENDANT OF THE TURKISH LEFT

With such strong national and pan-Kurdish credentials, unlike its preceding rebellion movements and organizations in Turkey, the paradox is that the PKK has neither been a nationalist Kurdish party in the conventional sense, nor, thanks to its larger than life, incontestable leader Abdullah Öcalan, ever abandoned its Turkey-centric *modus operandi*. The role and the function of the PKK is perhaps best summarized by its founding leader and sole ideologue, Öcalan:

The PKK is indeed the latest extensive movement of Kurdish rebellion which has emerged and developed initially—between 1970 and 1980—as an ideological rebel movement. But, later from 1980 to 1990, its development is as a political and operational movement, of a utopian theoretical group which departed with a theoretical-practical exploration of the world's stormy revolutions and counter-revolutions of the time, on an objective base which had been shaped by the infrastructure and superstructure of the Republic's preceding fifty years. In spite of its formal Kurdishness, it is a unique territorial freedom movement which took progressive steps towards combining the arts of politics and war.⁷

The PKK is one of the most important secular insurgent political movements in Kurdistan and indeed in the Middle East. Perhaps its most striking characteristic is that while it constitutes the latest and the most successful link in the sequence of Kurdish rebellions in the history of Turkey, rather than continuity it signifies a break. It did not emerge from a Kurdish nationalist political tradition. It is more of an offspring of the revolutionary left in Turkey, which explains its strong orientation to Turkey. Most importantly, and contrary to the widespread conviction, it is not a secessionist, pro-independence Kurdish

movement struggling ultimately for the founding a Kurdish nation-state. This feature remains overlooked and poorly understood. However, it is this most crucial component of its identity that has made the PKK enigmatic.

Reviewing the early history of PKK, it becomes clear that the party distinguished itself from most other Kurdish political parties. In respect to its political positioning and distinctive ideology, it was unusual and indeed unique. Significantly, the PKK did not emerge from “Kurdish politics”; its member did not have significant previous relations with any of the Kurdish political parties in the 1970s. It was instead born from the revolutionary left in Turkey. The core group establishing the PKK was carved out from a student environment in Ankara in the 1970s. Initially, many of them were active in the student organization, titled Ankara Higher Education Association (AYÖD was its acronym in Turkish). In 1973, the core group, mainly a loose network of students around Abdullah Öcalan, consisted of Öcalan himself, Haki Karer, Kemal Pir, Cemil Bayık, Duran Kalkan, and Ali Haydar Kaytan. Three of them (Öcalan, Bayık, and Kaytan) were ethnic Kurds, the other three being Turks. It had all started at the end of 1972, after the release of Öcalan from prison. He was jailed between April and October 1972, for his role in organizing a boycott at the Faculty of Political Science of Ankara University, in protest of the death of Mahir Çayan and his comrades.⁸ Çayan was a revolutionary Marxist student activist who had founded the clandestine organization THKP-C (Popular Liberation Party-Front of Turkey) advocating violent struggle to overthrow the government, seen by them as the “lackey of the American imperialism.”

Hence, the PKK, which later proved to be a formidable guerrilla force, emerged not in the guerrilla camps of the rugged territory of southeast Turkey (or Northern Kurdistan in the Kurdish politico-nationalist lexicon). It was not born in any other neighboring country in the Middle East—unlike Khoybun which initiated the Mt. Ararat rebellion (1928–1931) and originated in Syria and Lebanon—but in Turkey’s capital city. In other words, as far as its original roots are concerned, the PKK came to being not in the Kurdish-populated eastern parts of the country but in Central Turkey which is predominantly Turkish.⁹

Cemil Bayık, a co-founder of the PKK and its highest level leader, in an interview commemorating the anniversary of the launch of armed struggle, emphasized that Abdullah Öcalan contemplated a sustainable resistance while he was in prison for seven months in 1972. To this end, he tried to learn the nature of the Turkish state that he would wage his struggle against, and above all the Kurdish reality. Bayık said, “He [Öcalan], in prison, assessed why in Kurdistan the rebellions could not sustain for a long period and were defeated in quite a short time.”¹⁰ Bayık recalled the fact that the PKK insurgency had a well-planned preparatory background that had begun in Ankara, among

the leftist university student circles to which he, at the time, also belonged. As a matter of fact, concerning the period that preceded the formal birth of the PKK, Öcalan had said, “As soon as I came out [of prison], I tested my options. [I was a] THKP-C sympathizer, but a Kurdish group appeared.”¹¹ His close associates of that formative period of the PKK argue that until the end of 1975, it was not clear whether Öcalan was leading a Kurdish or a Turkish leftist group. “The twofold nature of the leadership of the ‘Kurdish National Movement’ in Turkey was not just a characteristic feature of the movement at the outset, but has always been the case in the PKK to varying degrees.”¹²

FOUNDATION AND FORMATION

The PKK was formally established on November 26–27, 1978, in the remote village of Diyarbakir in eastern Turkey, at a clandestine meeting of a group of young people gathered around Abdullah Öcalan. The period from the year 1973, when the would-be founders of the PKK were considered affiliated to the Turkish revolutionary youth movement, to 1978, the year of the formal establishment of the party, can be characterized as a process of group formation. The two years 1978 and 1979—at the beginning of which Öcalan left Turkey in secrecy and settled in Syria for 20 years until his expulsion under pressure from Turkey that led his eventual capture and imprisonment—were the party-building years. After party-building was accomplished, the next phase saw preparations to start the armed struggle in Turkey. While PKK militants enjoyed the use of military training facilities at the Palestinian camps run by leftist-nationalist Palestinian groups like the Popular Front and the Democratic Front in the Lebanese territory under Syrian control, the PKK signed an agreement in 1982 with Masoud Barzani and his organization Kurdistan Democrat Party to use the territory of Iraqi Kurdistan adjacent to Turkey. The PKK’s presence in that part of Kurdistan, in northern Iraq, was thus established in 1982 and since 2002 almost all the rugged, highly mountainous area running along the Turkish–Iraqi frontier has been controlled by the insurgent organization. The year 1984 is a milestone, as the beginning date of the PKK’s armed struggle against Turkey, both within and outside it.

RECONSTRUCTION

Another milestone date, no doubt, is 1999, the year the PKK’s larger-than-life leader Öcalan was captured and subsequent imprisoned with a Turkish verdict of aggravated life sentence. Öcalan was initially condemned to death, but under pressure from the Western world and with prospects of membership

in the European Union, Turkey abolished the death penalty at the turn of the century. Notwithstanding the legislative amendment that saved Öcalan's life, given the innumerable international examples, the capture of the leader of an insurgency suggested an irreparable blow, and therefore an end to the PKK's 15-year Kurdish rebellion. Many analysts and observers saw the end of the PKK, myself included. The time following the arrest proved us wrong. Although with the loss of its brain and head, the 2000s have been the most critical period for the PKK, the organization did survive the shock and trauma of its leader's capture and the retreat of its armed elements with high losses from Turkey to Iraqi Kurdistan. From 2000 to 2004, the PKK, with Öcalan sending instructions from his prison cell, focused on reconstructing itself and from 2004 on, it entered into a political stage as an even more influential player compared to earlier periods. In comparison to the embryonic period of the first half of the 1970s and the launch of armed struggle that convulsed Turkey from 1984 until Öcalan's capture, post-2004 has been the period when the PKK has enjoyed the greatest political influence.

Unexpectedly, Abdullah Öcalan's reputation and influence increased while he was in prison, and in parallel his loyal organization also grew to the extent that it was able to claim the representation of the Kurds in Turkey, something that no predecessor had ever achieved. Öcalan's constant ideological evolution, his firm ideological grip on his organization, and the vast number of loyalists proved a continuous impetus for regeneration of the PKK.

THIRD WORLD: THE CRADLE OF THE PKK

The period of decolonization in the wake of World War II had led to the global landscape of the 1960s. The Third World was rising; the glorious struggles of former colonies and exemplary heroes from Ho Chi Minh to Vo Nguyen Giap in Vietnam and Ernesto Che Guevara in Latin America gave inspiration to revolutionary youth everywhere. Moreover, the revolutionary turmoil in Europe and particularly the emergence of the Palestinian armed resistance in defiance against Israel—which was perceived by leftist revolutionaries of the region as the extension of Western neo-imperialism—fertilized the fetus destined to become the PKK in the 1970s and Turkey's most enduring Kurdish insurgency from the mid-1980s on.

At its birth and during the preliminary stages of the armed struggle, the PKK's documents and most prominently its founding manifesto (1978), concerning its objectives, the means to achieve them, the terminology used, and the overall outlook carry the distinctive marks of the epoch. The political goal was the liberation of Kurdistan, with the simultaneous destruction of colonialism and the creation of an independent state. It was not only the

Turkish colonialism that was implicated, but all the states that ruled over different parts of Kurdistan. In its 1978 manifesto, the PKK emphasized the slogan “Independent, United, and Democratic Kurdistan,” thereby advocating a pan-Kurdish platform, tacitly aiming to unite the northern (Turkish), southern (Iraqi), eastern (Iranian), and western (Syrian) parts, through violence. However, none of these other states—Iraq, Iran, and Syria—were as directly concerned, because the PKK was a Turkish Kurdish organization, targeting Turkey, and operating within a NATO-member country. Each, though differently and at varying levels, had its own interest in seeing a Turkey preoccupied with acute internal problems.

From the moment of its birth, the PKK was naturally stigmatized by Turkey as a secessionist and terrorist organization, a label it could never rid itself of despite the ideological transformation it passed through in three decades. It was listed as a terrorist organization by the United States in 1997 and by the European Union in 2002, even though it has rescinded its goal to build an independent Kurdish state by carving out territory from Turkey.

EVOLUTION: FROM MARXISM-LENINISM TO A *SUI GENERIS* ORGANIZATION

Although unsuccessful in radically changing the conviction of Turkey, the United States, and the European Union about itself, the PKK did change. The PKK documents written by Abdullah Öcalan reflect the evolution of the organization’s thinking and the change in its avowed objectives. In the years preceding the guerrilla war, Öcalan remained strictly within the boundaries of orthodox Marxism, as evidenced by his teachings published in three major works. The bibliographical list of these three editions was limited to five to eight Marxist classics. The eighty-four footnotes and quotations in Öcalan’s significant *oeuvre*, wherein he advocated violence to achieve the liberation and subsequent independence of Kurdistan, referred only to eight authors: Karl Marx, F. Engels, V. I. Lenin, J. Stalin, Mao Zedong, G. Dimitrov, Vo Nguyen Giap, and Le Duan. In his work about the organization, 16 sources were from Marx, Engels, Lenin, Giap, and Che Guevara.¹³ The pseudo-Marxist-Leninist approach that marked Öcalan’s and therefore the PKK’s thinking was abandoned with the ideological evolution of its leader and chief ideologue: “Gradually, the PKK avoided employing the term, ‘independent-united Kurdistan.’ Instead, it was more obsessed by the idea of ‘Free Kurdistan.’ The terms ‘freedom’ and ‘independence’ were to be employed, more and more, regarding the individual’s spiritual structure.”¹⁴ As the armed struggle of the PKK progressed—in other words, as the war of the Kurdish guerrillas expanded—Öcalan, abandoning both the

rhetoric of classical Marxism and the agitation language of “national liberation,” aimed at the development of a civil society recreating Kurdistan “from the bottom up.”¹⁵

Following his capture in 1999, Öcalan has further elaborated a distinctive understanding of socialism and revolution, breaking away almost entirely from orthodox communist doctrine imported from the former Soviet Union and China. Öcalan’s ideological evolution has gone hand in hand with the organizational transition of the PKK, from a classical Third World national liberation movement upholding Marxist-Leninist principles into a *sui generis* organization.¹⁶

NO MORE “INDEPENDENT KURDISTAN”: STRUGGLE FOR “DEMOCRATIC AUTONOMY”

In his defense during his trial at the Turkish tribunal, Öcalan rejected claims for an independent Kurdish state. He proposed a new democratic Turkey in which Kurds like other citizens would enjoy “democratic autonomy.” In rejecting a Kurdish nation-state, or indeed any nation-state, he envisaged a democracy beyond nation and state, aiming at the disassociation of democracy from nationalism. He consequently developed the idea of democratic confederalism, as a model that builds on the self-government of local communities and is organized in the form of open councils, town councils, local parliaments, and larger congresses. Since he proposed to build these self-governing bodies throughout Kurdistan and in every country in the region where Kurds are living, democratic confederalism would provide the unification of Kurdistan without partitioning any state or country. For Öcalan, a free Kurdistan could only be achievable in a democratic Middle East. Therefore, he and the PKK forfeited the aim of carving up territory from the countries with Kurdish populations, along with the concept of an independent Kurdish nation-state.

The development of a new political project was put forward when Öcalan started to study toward his defense while facing charges of treason. His political rivals and some among the Turkish authorities saw the radical departure in his ideological stance as indicating his cowardice and surrender. He was forced to leave Syria unexpectedly in October 1998, was obliged to leave the Russian Federation, Italy, and Greece, and was denied access to the Netherlands. Although it was true that neither he nor his organization was prepared for the dramatic changes they faced, it would be inaccurate to ascribe the radical transformation in Öcalan’s thinking to his unsuccessfully ended odyssey and eventual capture in Kenya. His physical odyssey may have ended in Kenya in February 1999, but his thinking had been in steady

evolution, especially since the end of the Cold War in 1989 and dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

MURRAY BOOKCHIN: AN UNUSUAL IDEOLOGICAL GODFATHER

In prison in the 2000s, having undergone a significant ideological overhaul, Öcalan started reading an array of post-Marxist political theory and discovered a similar mindset in American social theorist Murray Bookchin (1921–2006). Bookchin, a former Marxist who in his youth had wandered across irreconcilable opposites from Stalinism to Trotskyism and for an extended period also identified himself as an anarchist, was a prominent figure in the American Green movement. Bookchin developed a theory of social ecology and decentralization. His concept of communalism and Öcalan's democratic confederalism had traits in common. Upon Bookchin's death in 2006, the PKK hailed its leader's guru as one of the greatest social scientists of the twentieth century. Thanks to Öcalan and through promotion by the PKK, Murray Bookchin's thinking surprisingly became influential among hundreds of thousands of Kurds in the Middle East. Öcalan's Bookchin-influenced teachings were tried out in practice in the Kurdish-controlled zones of Syria from 2012 onwards.

Öcalan has written a series of books proposing a societal model for the Kurdish people. His "Öcalanism" was directly inspired by American social theorist Murray Bookchin, a radical leftist who wanted to break down capitalism through "libertarian municipalism." Bookchin believed that capitalism's fatal flaw lay in its conflict with nature. . . . He recommended the decentralization of polluted metropolitan centers and pesticide-ridden industrial farms so that people could live on a smaller scale, produce their food locally, use renewable energy, and manage their own affairs. On the latter front, he recommended democratizing urban neighborhoods by empowering citizen assemblies. These assemblies could then confederate at different levels: city, region, former nation, and so forth. They would send delegates to confederal councils to coordinate and administer policy. Power would be based among the people, who would be directly represented at the top. In time, he theorized, confederal municipalities would become a counterweight to the nation-state and capitalism would naturally disappear.¹⁷

These lines are a quite accurate presentation of Bookchin's otherwise elaborated and complex theses, put in a nutshell by Fabrice Balanche, a French academician who made a reputation as a specialist on Syrian geopolitics

during the years of conflict in the Levant. Bookchin's thinking became relevant in Syria via Öcalan and the Syrian affiliate of the PKK, the PYD (*Partiya Yêkîtiya Demokrat*, Democratic Union Party). In "The Kurdish Path to Socialism in Syria" (May 16, 2017), Balanche wrote, "The PKK leader became Bookchin's ideological disciple in 2004 after reading several of his books. A year later, at the group's 2005 congress, he made 'libertarian municipalism' the official PKK political ideology."¹⁸

Janet Biehl, who cooperated with Bookchin for more than two decades and co-authored a number of books with him, presented a vivid and in-depth account of the interaction between Bookchin and Öcalan and how the former influenced the latter, in her speech at the conference called "Challenging Capitalist Modernity: Alternative Concepts and the Kurdish Question" in Hamburg, February 2012. In her presentation entitled "Bookchin, Öcalan, and the Dialectics of Democracy" she said:

I don't know anything about Öcalan's other intellectual influences—the names [Immanuel] Wallerstein, [Fernand] Braudel, and [Michel] Foucault are often mentioned. But it's clear that in 2002 Öcalan started reading Bookchin intensively, especially *Ecology of Freedom and Urbanization Without Cities*. Thereafter, through his lawyers, he began recommending *Urbanization Without Cities* to all mayors in Turkish Kurdistan and *Ecology of Freedom* to all militants. In the spring of 2004, he had his lawyers contact Murray, which they did through an intermediary, who explained to Murray that Öcalan considered himself his student, had acquired a good understanding of his work and was eager to make the ideas applicable to Middle Eastern societies. He asked for a dialogue with Murray and sent one of his manuscripts. . . . By 2004–5, then, Öcalan had either given up on or shifted focus from his effort to persuade the state to reform itself by democratizing from the top down. "The idea of democratization of the state," he wrote in 2005, "is out of place." He had concluded that the state was a mechanism of oppression—"the organizational form of the ruling class" and as such "one of the most dangerous phenomena in history." It is toxic to the democratic project, a "disease," and while it is around, "we will not be able to create a democratic system." So Kurds and their sympathizers "must never focus our efforts on the state" or on becoming a state, because that would mean losing the democracy, and playing "into the hands of the capitalist system." That seems pretty explicit, and certainly in accord with Bookchin's revolutionary project. Bookchin posited that once citizen's assemblies were created and confederated, they would become a dual power that could be pitted against the nation-state—and would overthrow and replace it.¹⁹

Another noteworthy account of Murray Bookchin's influence on Öcalan was published in June 2018 issue of *The New York Review of Books* and written

by Bookchin's daughter Debbie Bookchin. She provided a firsthand account and in-depth analysis of the intellectual bonds between her father and the leader of Turkey's Kurdish insurgency. She wrote:

When Öcalan's intermediary, a German translator named Reimar Heider wrote to my father in 2004, Heider told him that the Kurdish leader had been reading Turkish translations of my father's books in prison and considered himself a "good student" of my father's. Indeed, Heider went on: He [Öcalan] has rebuilt his political strategy around the vision of a 'democratic-ecological society' and developed a model to build up a civil society in Kurdistan and the Middle East. . . . He has recommended Bookchin's books to every mayor in all Kurdish cities and wanted everybody to read them.²⁰

For Debbie Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom* published in 1982 was her father's magnum opus. Her lines are as follows:

Öcalan read *The Ecology of Freedom*, and agreed with its analysis. In his own book *In Defense of the People* . . . Öcalan wrote: "The development of authority and hierarchy, even before the class society emerged is a significant turning point in history. No law of nature requires natural societies to develop into hierarchical state-based societies. . . . The Marxist belief that class society is an inevitability is a big mistake."²¹

Debbie Bookchin also underlined:

My father's emphasis on hierarchy became a signature aspect of Öcalan's efforts to redefine the Kurdish problem. In *The Roots of Civilization*, Öcalan's first published volume of prison writings, he, too, traced the history of early communitarian societies and the transition to capitalism. Like Bookchin, he celebrated the formation of early societies in greater Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilization and birthplace of art, written language, and agriculture. He reminded us that the powerful kinship ties that remain a fixture of Kurdish family life—the traditional relationships of extended families, and folk culture—can provide a foundation for a new ethical society that melds the best aspects of Enlightenment values with a communal and ecological sensibility.

THE REVOLUTIONARY FEMINIST

Debbie Bookchin conceded that Öcalan went further than her father in the significance he placed on patriarchy. Öcalan sees patriarchy as a defining characteristic of human civilization. Debbie Bookchin wrote, "The

5,000-year-old history of civilization is essentially the history of enslavement of woman” and “the depth of woman’s enslavement and the intentional masking of the fact is thus closely linked to the rise within a society of hierarchical and statist power.”²²

This focus is particularly relevant in its revolutionizing impact on women’s participation in the ranks of the PKK. According to Bookchin:

Öcalan’s interest in women’s liberation preceded his time in İmralı and was never simply a theoretical matter. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Kurdish women from both Syria and Turkey, where they were suffering particularly harsh repression at the hands of the Turkish state, were joining the PKK in growing numbers. Leaving their villages and towns to travel to the PKK training camps in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon and the Qandil Mountains of Iraq, these women helped to swell the ranks of PKK fighters to 15,000 by 1994, with women comprising an estimated one-third of the force. In keeping with the PKK’s stress on study and education, these women, while they trained as guerrillas, also read feminist and other radical texts. Öcalan, who had already been reassessing the problem of the ‘dominant male’ personality in the PKK, supported their demands for equal rights, a separate militia organization, and their institutions.²³

Consequently, thanks to Öcalan’s efforts and instructions, during the second decade of the 2000s, the number of women in the ranks of the armed forces and other institutions have been almost equal to men, and in every PKK-affiliated institution the executive is on principle co-chaired, a unique phenomenon indeed in establishing gender equality.

“Despite all this, the PKK remains on terrorist blacklists maintained by the United States and the European Union, and the Western media inexplicably persist in calling Öcalan and the PKK ‘Marxist-Leninist’ more than a decade after that ideology was formally renounced, both in practice and in thousands of pages of Öcalan’s writings,”²⁴ writes Debbie Bookchin in exasperation.

THE PERPETUAL PERCEPTION: PKK THE “TERRORIST”

It is evident that neither the United States nor the European Union acknowledged the PKK’s ideological change and organizational transformation, and its formal renouncement of Marxism-Leninism. Nor they were impressed at all that the PKK and its only ideologue and uncontested leader Abdullah Öcalan had adopted Murray Bookchin’s teachings. Turkey, in its turn, did not pay much attention to the ideological evolution in the organization that might assuage its fears of partition, nor did it believe that the PKK had undergone a

genuine metamorphosis. From 1993 on, among many other reasons, perpetual Turkish belief concerning the PKK's intentions of dividing Turkey and carving territory for an independent Kurdish state played a crucial role in efforts to resolve the Kurdish question by a political settlement.

During our lengthy conversation on Mt. Qandil in 2010, Murat Karayılan, the principal political official of the PKK until 2015 and its legendary top military commander, emphasized that the PKK had abandoned "separatism" in 1993. He said with apparent irony and bitterness:

It has been 18 years. Where is separatism? Who is a separatist? For 18 years, although arms remain our tools, we want to solve this issue without weapons. What we had in 1995 was a Change Congress, where we switched from the goal of separation to the goal of a federation. With the 1995 process, a radical change of paradigm began.

He also verified during the interview that in its evolution from the goal of "separation" to one of "federation," the PKK's political goals changed toward "autonomy" after 2001: "We declare our objective with the slogan 'Democratic Turkey—Autonomous Kurdistan.' We set out on this road for this cause. Once democratic autonomy is established, the rest will follow. And democratic autonomy is not against the deployment of the Turkish army in Kurdistan."²⁵

This last statement not only sounded what was perhaps a hopeful new approach on the part of the PKK that could help the ultimate settlement of the conflict, it also constituted a revolutionary change and development concerning the PKK's perception on Turkey's future.

For the Turkish army, which had monopolized "the Kurdish file" since 1920s and was in charge of the security of the country, its deployment in every inch of Turkey including the overwhelmingly Kurdish region of the southeast and east of the country was its natural right. Therefore, such revolutionary change in PKK's thinking and jargon had no meaningful impact on the Turkish officials, other than perhaps to anger them by bringing in the concept of democratic autonomy, a notion entirely alien to the Turkish centralized tradition. On the contrary, autonomy was mostly perceived as the prelude to an ultimate separation.

During the formative years of the Republic in Turkey, denial of the Kurds eventually changed and led to recognition of their distinct ethno-national rights. The Kurdish question, over time, manifested in violent rebellions in the construction period of Mustafa Kemal's Turkish nation-state. During the most recent episode of Turkey's state-crafting under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, hailed by its architect and its followers as the "New Turkey" or by some as the "Second Republic," the essence of the question remained unchanged.

This period was so different that denial of the Kurdish identity was pointless. However, implementation of their basic rights—which should ideally emanate from the recognition of their distinct identity and the corresponding requirement for devolution of power—was not observed.

In the post-2015 period, the Kurdish question was back where it had started in the early 1920s, the period when what was then the “New Turkey” was founded over the debris of the Ottoman Empire.

The quest for a peaceful, political settlement of the problem on the Turkish side was initiated by the iconoclast of modern Turkish history, President Turgut Özal (1927–1993), during the last months of his life. To engage with the “terrorist” PKK was a taboo at the time. Nevertheless, his quest brought about the first cease-fire declared by Abdullah Öcalan, which heralded the best prospects for a settlement since the emergence of the Kurdish question.

NOTES

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3. Çandar, *Leaving the Mountain*, 44. (Translated by the author himself from the Turkish original “*Dağdan İniş*” : *PKK Nasıl Silah Bırakır?*)

4. ANF (Firat News Agency), “*Ali Haydar Kaytan ile Söyleşi*” [Interview with Ali Haydar Kaytan], April 3, 2010.

5. M. Can Yüce, *Doğudan Yükselen Güneş* (İstanbul: İthaki Yayınları, 1999), 26.

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7. Abdullah Öcalan, *Kürt Sorununa Demokratik Çözüm Manifestosu* [The democratic solution manifesto to Kurdish question], *Savunmalar I-II-III* (Koln: Weşanên Serxwebun, 1999), 27.

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12. *Ibid.*, 79.

13. *Ibid.*, 91.

14. Ibid., 90.
15. Ibid., 124.
16. Akkaya and Jongerden, *The PKK*, 151.
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Part II

EXPLORING PEACE

Chapter 5

Özal, Talabani, Öcalan

President Turgut Özal, without losing time on niceties like exchanging greetings, bluntly asked: “Tell me, what kind of a man is this Apo?”¹ He was keen to hear my impressions. It was long past midnight. We were in the first hours of Saturday morning, on March 20, 1993. The rays of the sun had begun to pierce into the room in his Ankara residence. Hours later would commence a National Security Council meeting where Turkey’s omnipotent military exercised its political power, chaired by President Özal. Next day, the Kurdish New Year Nowruz, in a rare coincidence, would overlap with the Eid al Fitr that followed the Muslim Holy Month of Ramadan. And so, on March 21, the first cease-fire of the PKK since it started the armed struggle in 1984 would be in force, kindling hopes for the peaceful settlement of the conflict.

THE FIRST CEASE-FIRE WITH TALABANI

The notorious leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, had declared a unilateral cease-fire for one month only a few days previously in Bar Elias, a small Lebanese town in the Bekaa Valley. I had had a private conversation with him and I would convey my impressions to the president of Turkey, right after that historical event, which took place in front of scores of Turkish and international reporters and cameras.

It was I who had published Öcalan’s intention on declaring the cease-fire. My sources were the Iraqi Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani and a fellow Kurdish journalist Kamran Karadaghi who later became Talabani’s chief-of-staff during his Iraqi presidency in Baghdad. Kamran and I had played equally important roles in the establishment of relations between Turgut Özal and Jalal Talabani. Something of a personal chemistry developed between the



Figure 5.1 The Historic Image of a Historic Moment, **Öcalan Declaring Cease-Fire in Bar Elias, Lebanon, March 16, 1993.** To his right, the mediator for Turkish-Kurdish settlement Jalal Talabani (president of Iraq 2006–2014). Standing on his left with eyeglasses is Kamran Karadaghi, who played a major role with the author on the establishment of relations between Turkey’s president Turgut Özal and the Iraqi Kurdish leadership. The author is next to Karadaghi, staring at Öcalan during his declaration of the PKK’s first cease-fire. *Source:* Author’s Personal Archive.

two. Talabani was acting as a private intermediary between Özal and Öcalan for the peaceful settlement of Turkey’s Kurdish problem. A unilateral cease-fire by the PKK would be a far-reaching step in that direction. One day in February 1993, he called from Damascus to inform me about Öcalan’s intention and asked me to report it to President Özal. Talabani felt indebted to Özal who had made a daunting opening on the Kurdish issue by inviting him to Ankara in 1991. It was unprecedented for a Turkish president to take such a step, and Özal attracted the fury of Turkey’s traditional ruling elite. His political rival and former mentor, Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel, went so far as to accuse him of “high treason” for inviting Talabani. Eventually, the president of Turkey filed a lawsuit against the prime minister of Turkey. Turkey’s powerful military, which had traditionally had the last say on the Kurdish issue since the 1920s, was also allergic to Özal’s moves. Talabani not only had personal gratitude toward Özal, but also had an interest in his strength in Turkish politics, as the shrewd politician that he was. For Talabani, the PKK leader’s declaration of cessation of hostilities would be a priceless political gift for Turkey’s president, his sponsor, and could contribute to enhancing the overall standing of the Kurds across the Middle East. The PKK’s armed

struggle had spilled the blood of thousands of people in Turkey since 1984, laid a heavy burden on its economy, and kept the country in a state of permanent instability. A unilateral cease-fire by the PKK had hitherto seemed unachievable, and Talabani ostensibly had been successful in his mediation between Özal and Öcalan. It would be the first ever cease-fire since the PKK-led Kurdish insurgency had commenced.

Years later, from the PKK's official historiography, I would understand better the importance of such an achievement. Mustafa Karasu, a prominent PKK leader, mentioned the first cease-fire as a milestone, in his long narrative on Kurdish peace processes. He said:

Özal was a pragmatic person. He had seen that serious troubles would confront Turkey due to the rapid progress of the Kurdish problem. Because of this, he had sent messages to Leader Apo [Abdullah Öcalan], suggesting "let us create a détente, make a ceasefire, etc." through Cengiz Çandar, Talabani, and other intermediaries. . . . Leader Apo thought if a democratic solution could be reached, there could be steps taken regarding the Kurdish problem on that basis and that could be a beginning to move towards a resolution.²

Following Talabani's call I rushed to the presidential palace in Ankara to pass the information to Özal. His seemingly apathetic reaction was



Figure 5.2 President Turgut Özal of Turkey, in an Exceptional Emotional Gesture to the Author at the Reception for the Seventy-eighth Anniversary of the Republic, October 29, 1991, Presidential Palace, Ankara. *Source:* Author's Personal Archive.

disproportionate to the significance of the development. It was less than I expected. “We will see whether he declares,” said Özal coolly, when I conveyed to him the news that Öcalan was preparing for a cease-fire and would invite me for the occasion of its declaration. The news, with a journalistic scoop, was published in the then highest circulating daily of Turkey, *Sabah*, on March 11 and had a bombshell effect on Turkish public opinion. Öcalan then announced the date of the press conference as Tuesday March 16. Before hitting the road for Lebanon, I went to see President Özal once again and told him that I would have a private audience with Öcalan and would bring back my impressions and confidential messages—that is to say, if the PKK leader had any—for President Özal. I called Talabani who was in Damascus with Abdullah Öcalan and asked him to arrange a private meeting between the PKK leader and myself.

MEETING ÖCALAN FOR ÖZAL

A few minutes after the momentous press conference (which took place in a less-than-impressive building that was perhaps being used as safehouse by the PKK), I was escorted to a room where Öcalan was waiting. He was, rather unusually, wearing a suit and tie, implying the seriousness and the sincerity of his commitment in opening a new chapter with Turkey. Until Jalal Talabani, Kamran Karadaghi, and Öcalan’s bodyguards stormed into the room and interrupted our conversation, mostly he spoke and I listened, for something under an hour. Before leaving the room, I reminded him that I had lived in the Middle East almost a decade before him, and spent time in a Palestinian base quite close to Bar Elias, where we were having the conversation. He smiled and said, “We have taken up the banner,” perhaps a bit sarcastically. At that point, I recalled reading an interview where Öcalan said the first political activity he was involved in was an anti-government demonstration in Ankara in 1970 that I had led. I was the head of the Student Union of the Faculty of Political Sciences of Ankara University, the hotbed of leftist student activism at the time. The school had left a strong political impact on him and shaped the formative period of the PKK. In that interview, I recalled him saying that he had seen and recognized me as the leader and organizer of the march, which ended in a clash with the police. “Do I remember correctly? Your first political activity that ended in a clash with police was the one I led?” I queried. He nodded and confirmed. It was my turn for sarcasm. “Do not say this anywhere else,” I joked, “I will be held responsible for all that you have done since then.”³

As I would realize much later, my affiliation with the *68 Generation*—an iconic year in the twentieth century characterized by global revolutionary



Figure 5.3 Author Flanked by Abdullah Öcalan (L) and Jalal Talabani (R), March 16, 1993, Lebanon. The photo was shot following the author's private conversation with Öcalan after his declaration of the first cease-fire by the PKK in the history of the Kurdish conflict. *Source:* Author's Personal Archive.

youth upheaval—and my political activism in Turkey's revolutionary left followed by my presence in Lebanon and Syria within the ranks of Palestinian movement, would facilitate my encounters with the PKK people. After all (as we will see later in this chapter), the PKK was born in the university environment of Ankara in the early 1970s, and since the beginning of the 1980s almost all of its prominent figures and many of its political and military cadres spent time in Syria and Lebanon. Generational affinity and having shared a similar trajectory provided specific terms of reference between myself and these figures, I guess quite naturally.

In the first moments of my first meeting with Murat Karayılan at the PKK's Olympian redoubt Mt. Qandil in Iraqi Kurdistan, he greeted me saying that he knew me very well as I belonged to the generation of their idols and took part in the Palestinian liberation struggle.⁴ As the top military commander of the PKK, he was a legendary name for Kurds, and acted as heir to Öcalan from the time of his capture and arrest in Turkey in 1999, until 2013. We met in November 2010, seventeen years after my talk with Abdullah Öcalan. I had climbed up Mt. Qandil to meet Karayılan with the mission of preparing a blueprint that could help the peaceful settlement of the Kurdish issue. I was assigned to write a report on how the PKK might lay down its arms

and leave the mountains it has been fighting from since 1984. My travel to the Olympian headquarters of the PKK was arranged by the president of Iraq, Mam Jalal (Talabani), and was endorsed by the president of Turkey, Abdullah Gül. Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan was informed about my meeting with the PKK leader and top commander on the day I was with him. Murat Karayılan was also told such details. Greeting me with a reminder about my revolutionary youth was a meaningful gesture that he would not treat me as someone who was in close connection with the highest authorities of adversarial Turkey.

WITH ÖZAL ON ÖCALAN

But in March 1993, when I was at the presidential palace in Ankara, back from my encounter with Abdullah Öcalan, I had neither insights about the PKK figures other than the biases with which almost all Turks were nourished daily, nor any acquaintances in their ranks. President Özal, despite having the opposite political upbringing, always had a keen interest in my leftist revolutionary past. He was curious to hear stories and anecdotes about the political domain of Turkey, which to him was uncharted territory. I sensed the same sincere curiosity when he asked my impressions about Öcalan's personality. He trusted me, and was eager to listen to my observations.

With that in mind, I gave him the very core of my observation on Öcalan: "My impression is that he wants to be a political actor in the Turkish political theater,"⁵ I said.

"Until now, he has been in the hands of the Syrian regime and its intelligence apparatus. However, his primary objective is to get into the political process here in Turkey. The cease-fire he declared could be the first step that he gradually contemplates untying his bonds with Syria, and over time, to taking his place as a prominent political actor in Turkey's political game."⁶

I added that it would not be difficult to resolve the Kurdish issue in Turkey through Abdullah Öcalan, but the existing balance of power in the Turkish political system would not permit it.⁷ Özal listened to me attentively and insisted that I should elaborate on what I was saying. Mentioning "the deep state" in a conversation with the legitimate, de jure head of state would sound improper. That is why I had chosen to speak of the unfavorable balance of power that would not allow the resolution of Turkey's Kurdish question. The not-so-difficult resolution that I had in mind was to bring Abdullah Öcalan to Turkey through a political amnesty and allow him to be elected into Parliament in a by-election. This, I believed, would integrate him and his movement into the Turkish political life. Such a radical step would sound reasonable to all those who are involved in conflict resolution

in the international arena, but given the conditions in Turkey in 1993, it was utopian.

Yet, it was not utterly baseless. Öcalan in his historic press conference minutes before our encounter had made this public:

We are not demanding an immediate separation from Turkey. We are realistic about this subject. Do not interpret this [cease-fire] as a simple tactic [serving a hidden agenda]. There are many reasons as to why [we are realists]. Those who understand the historical, political and economic situation of [the Kurds and Turks] know well that separation could not take place. They are like flesh and bone.

Öcalan was a figure demonized by the propaganda machinery of Turkish state for years. He was called a vicious terrorist who wanted to disintegrate Turkey and who therefore was a separatist villain. In my mind, his public rejection of separation with the emphasis on the common destiny of Turks and Kurds, which he had described as flesh and bone, deserved the benefit of the doubt. It could provide the impetus for resolution of the Kurdish issue through non-military means.

ADVOCATING TURKISH-KURDISH UNITY

Years later, in what was perhaps his most important public address—read in Turkish and Kurdish by two Parliament Members representing both genders, and Turks and Kurds, in front of over one million people in the Nowruz celebrations in Diyarbakır—Öcalan reiterated his postulate of Turkish-Kurdish unity in even stronger and unequivocal terms. Underlining unity rather than conflict and mutual humiliation, it was high time for coexistence, unity, and forgiveness for the misdeeds of past. Referring to World War I, he reminded the Turks and Kurds that they had become martyrs side by side in the Gallipoli campaign. They had waged the War of Independence hand in hand (synonymous with the National Struggle that led to the foundation of the Turkish nation-state), and again inaugurated the 1920 Majlis (Grand National Assembly, the executive and legislative body of the Liberation War) together. Following his reference to a common past, he emphasized a common future for the Turks and Kurds: “We [as Turks and Kurds] have to build our future together as our common past requires. Today, the spirit of 1920, during the foundation of Grand National Assembly illuminates the new era.”

For almost all experts who study the PKK, observe the Kurdish issue, and are not carried away by Turkish official discourse, Öcalan has been known for his Turkey-centric approach. Turkish-Kurdish union has always been

pivotal in his thinking; he would offer the union as a remedy to the ills of the Middle East.

ÖZAL: A LONELY PRESIDENT IN A MINEFIELD

However, in 1993, neither was Öcalan's Turkey-centric approach perspicuous, nor was the Turkish ruling elite aware of or willing to acknowledge it. Most importantly, the Turkish military was almost categorically against any notion of reconciling with Kurdish insurgents. The indoctrinated Turkish public opinion saw Öcalan as public enemy number one and a vicious terrorist who spilled the blood of thousands of innocent people. Abdullah Öcalan was demonized to the point of ultimate public evil, and any reconciliation with him and his PKK would be an anathema. Although the perspective of Turkey's political class, military bureaucracy, and public opinion was decidedly negative on Öcalan, the cease-fire and the hope for an ultimate cessation of hostilities that would spare the blood of the people and energy of the country was welcomed. In such a critical yet paradoxical situation, vision and political courage were scarce, despite being the most necessary traits. There was almost nobody other than President Özal who possessed the prerequisites for advancing a peaceful, that is to say, a political settlement for the Kurdish question. He was a lonely man in the presidential palace. Nonetheless, he was treated as the rising star of international politics since all his predictions and analyses on Iraq and its leader Saddam Hussein were confirmed by the Gulf War in 1991. Even as he earned the admiration of his American counterpart George Bush, his power weakened domestically in a rather paradoxical way. In the post-Cold War era, consolidating alliance and partnership with the sole superpower, the United States, was essential, and Özal had succeeded in this. However, the Turkish government under the leadership of his mentor-turned-political nemesis, Süleyman Demirel, was trying to curb his power and even looking for ways to bring him down. The party that Özal founded and led in power for a decade had lost the elections in 1991, and to add insult to injury, Mesut Yılmaz, his successor as the party chairman, had turned against him. Turgut Özal, in 1993, was an isolated president, in his presidential palace and residence situated on the highest hilltop in Ankara, besieged by his political opponents.

The one-month unilateral cease-fire declared by Öcalan was a precious gift for him to take the initiative for resolution of Turkey's most lethal and potentially existential conflict. If the cease-fire was maintained and utilized to prepare the ground for ending the conflict and resolving the issue, Özal's position in domestic politics would be consolidated. With a renewed legitimacy, he would be able to overpower his opponents, and steer Turkey

toward further reform and progress—after all, in the previous decade he had orchestrated the country’s profound economic transformation by adopting free-market policies, which had been long overdue. Yet, given the structural odds pertinent to the Kurdish conflict, he had to tread diligently and carefully, as if navigating in a labyrinthine minefield. The inherent risks could easily outweigh the opportunities offered.

In the month following the declaration of the PKK cease-fire, although there were no violations and it did hold, there was no political move. The government did not make any decision on the cease-fire and thereby on the larger context of the Kurdish question. The only response offered by the minister of interior was inviting the PKK fighters to surrender themselves to Turkish justice. The influential circles in the military were disseminating the view that the cease-fire would benefit the terrorist organization by giving it time to regroup and replenish. The assessment was that the cease-fire decision was just a tactical move taken from a weak position by the terrorist organization, which was not far from being destroyed permanently under the blows of the Turkish military. By declaring a cease-fire, they were trying to gain time for survival. That was the dominant perception of the military about the cease-fire.

President Özal had a rather different view of the situation. He saw in the cease-fire a window of opportunity to address and ultimately to resolve the Kurdish question. He wanted to believe, as if he is entrusted with a divine mission to resolve the matter. In our private conversations, he told me that since he held the title of president, it was incumbent upon him to serve his people by solving the most intractable problem of Turkey. He was a practicing Muslim and told me a number of times in an apolitical manner that he was concerned about how to respond to God Almighty if asked why he had not tackled the issue despite having the responsibility to do so. For him, besides being a religious obligation, it was equally a practical problem. “Without solving the Kurdish problem, Turkey could not set itself on the track for real progress and development” was what he believed and stated in our conversations.

MISSIONARY ON THE ROAD

Özal passed away suddenly on April 17, 1993, exactly one day after the PKK’s deadline for the cease-fire. During his last period, three issues occupied him day and night. His political fortune was intertwined with that of Turkey, and he was contemplating stepping down from the presidency to initiate a new political struggle, which would be unprecedented in Turkish history. Another issue was the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina; Özal felt not only

a political but also a deeply personal emotional obligation to help the Bosnian people. Beginning with the first month of the year 1993, he was always on the road. He was in the United States as the first head of state hosted by President Bill Clinton at the White House; he lobbied for the Bosnia case and undertook the mission to report on the situation in the Balkans to Clinton. On his return from the overseas trip, he visited Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania, and Croatia, successively. The central issue was what to do for the Bosnian situation. I participated in all his travels. In the meantime, especially after March 16, the day Öcalan declared the first ever cease-fire of the PKK, he was focused on the Kurdish issue.

In early March, he left for a long, historical, and exhausting visit to the newly independent Turkic world of Central Asia and Azerbaijan. Despite the lull in the armed conflict because of the cease-fire, there was no progress on the political front vis-à-vis the Kurdish issue. The tension between him and the Demirel government had caused inertia. Under the careful eyes of the unhappy and trigger-prone military, ostensibly nobody wanted to touch the hot potato. The issue was not even addressed in its ethnic dimension. Instead, it was called the “Southeast Problem” or merely separatist terrorism. The deadline, then, would be reached without any significant step taken, which would mean the resumption of the bloody confrontation.

I called Jalal Talabani who was then in Damascus and asked him to mediate with Abdullah Öcalan to extend the cease-fire without any condition attached and indefinitely. If Öcalan was really committed to a resolution, he had to provide a breathing space for President Özal, because he was the only political actor who was genuinely interested in a solution, I said. The government was not moving and had no idea on what to do; given the ongoing friction between the president and the prime minister, extra time would be needed for the former to find ways to overcome the government’s inertia and inability to find a solution. Attaching no conditions for an indefinitely extended cease-fire would strengthen Özal’s hand in his dealings with the others. Wishing sincerely the best for Özal and trying hard to enhance his position in Turkey’s internal power equation, Talabani was totally on board. He told me on the phone that although he could not promise on behalf of Öcalan, he hoped to get from him what I had asked for. It did not take him long to get back to me. Talabani said, “You can tell Mr President, he [Öcalan] will extend the cease-fire with no strings attached and without any deadline!”

TRACING THE PRESIDENT IN CENTRAL ASIA

I hit the road immediately. I joined Özal at night in Ashgabad, the capital of Turkmenistan. He had completed the first three legs of his Central Asia

tour with visits to Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. The next day, we would be leaving Turkmenistan for Baku, Azerbaijan. That would be the most crucial leg of his visit, as Azerbaijan had very recently lost territory to Armenia around the disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabagh. Azerbaijan's pro-Turkey president Ebulfez Elçibey was enthusiastically waiting for Özal and Turkey's helping hand. But Demirel, being closer to Elçibey's political rival, Haydar Aliyev, who was an influential leader of the former Soviet Union, was worried about being pulled into conflict with Russia, which was supporting Armenia against Elçibey's Azerbaijan. He did not want Turkey to get involved in the Caucasian imbroglio, and before Özal's arrival in Baku, he made statements in Ankara that Özal was no more than a titular head of state with no executive power. Demirel undercut Özal in South Caucasus, projecting Turkey's domestic power game beyond its frontiers. Özal arrived in Baku as a president undermined by his own prime minister. I was accompanying him, spontaneously, as the harbinger of good news on the Kurdish conflict.

On his way back from Baku to Ankara, I took the seat of the Foreign Minister Hikmet Çetin at his request and we spoke until the presidential aircraft Ankara.

I had already notified Özal of the good news that Öcalan would extend the cease-fire without a deadline and with no conditions attached. In our conversation, which would be the last, mainly he spoke and I listened. After expressing his bitterness about how Prime Minister Demirel had undercut his mission in Azerbaijan, without losing much time he shifted to the Kurdish issue. He had contemplated how to circumvent the resistance of the government and the parliament, which seemingly would not enact a law in the direction of a non-military solution. He then opened up his mind to me and disclosed his formula for how to proceed with the settlement of the Kurdish issue. For him, the sine qua non had to be the integration of the PKK into the Turkish political system, and to this end, it had to decommission—that is to say, the armed struggle had to be terminated. What he had in mind was an amnesty PKK members that would be done in two stages. For the first stage, the rank and file and all gun-carrying PKK members should be pardoned and granted all political rights. Without involving the leadership of the organization and above all, Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK would not give its consent to the members and fighters coming into the open and engaging in legitimate politics in Turkey. They had to be included. That has to be the second stage. However, given an unprepared public full of hatred and outrage toward Öcalan and his inner circle, they had to wait for five years—in exile—without engaging in any activity against the Turkish state. At that time they would also be included in the political amnesty and therefore could come back to Turkey with full political rights. Even now, two decades after my conversation with

Özal—that is to say, when he disclosed his formula for the solution—there has to date been no other project advanced by any Turkish official that is more creative than the one proposed by Özal to resolve the Kurdish conflict.

In 1993, President Özal thought that for such a political amnesty to be implemented in two stages over five years, a government decree would suffice. As he studied the matter and addressed the details of the Turkish legal system, this option came to the fore as the most optimal step to be taken. For Özal, the main problem was getting Prime Minister Demirel on board. With the inherent duality in decision-making processes of the Turkish political system and disagreement on the most pressing issue of the country, any viable solution remained beyond reach. However, if the issue remained unsolved, it would further jeopardize the political stability and economic well-being of the country.

ÖZAL'S TESTIMONY TO END THE KURDISH CONFLICT

During the Baku-Ankara flight, we discussed ways to overcome the obstacle that Demirel could present. Özal was committed to push for a solution for the Kurdish issue. “After a while,” he said with a sense of resentment in his voice, “irrespective of the cost I may pay for it, I will come forward and declare my proposal on the solution of this issue. Unless this question is resolved, Turkey cannot progress. The solution to this [Kurdish] issue will be the last legacy I will leave to my people.” It was as if he was telling me his testimony.

I continued pondering the ways and means by which he could persuade the government and the military to cooperate and coordinate with him. With a thoughtful expression on his face, he interrupted the brainstorming, saying he intended to see Demirel as soon as he was back home and talk to him about the urgency of the matter. I sensed a kind of exhausted spirit when he mumbled, “I’ll see when I’m back in Ankara.” He perhaps knew Demirel better than anybody and therefore he was aware that Demirel would not like to take any step that could be seen as rewarding Özal politically. Furthermore, everybody in Turkey knew very well that Demirel was a tough nut to crack.

What worried Özal most was that if the opportunity offered by the cease-fire were missed, the terror and violence would return with an unprecedented magnitude and a heavy toll regarding the casualties.

The plane began to descend. After the president disembarked, I would remain on board and proceed to İstanbul, the final destination of the aircraft. Our conversation during the flight to Turkey on the last leg of his long trip to Central Asia and the Caucasus was over. Before we parted, he told me he would be coming to İstanbul on Saturday and I should meet him on Saturday

afternoon at the presidential retreat to continue with the conversation on the Kurdish issue. I stood up, said farewell to him, and went back to my seat before landing. The day was Thursday.

On that Saturday, April 17, we all woke to the shocking news of President Turgut Özal's heart attack. He would not make it to İstanbul. He passed away in Ankara.

It was not only Turkey's president who died in spring 1993; in a short while the hopes for reconciliation with Kurds and an end to the insurgency would die also.

Özal's death signaled the birth of the bloodiest episode in the Kurdish conflict in Turkey.

NOTES

1. Apo is the diminutive in Turkish for the name Abdullah, like Bob for Robert or Joe for Joseph in English. In Turkey, it is the popular usage for Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK leader. Many authors have committed an error in writing that it also means "Uncle" in Kurdish, thus to address Öcalan as Apo is a reflection of respect and affection. This is wrong. In Kurdish, Apê is maternal uncle and has nothing to do with Apo.

2. See <http://www.ajansafirat.com/news/kurdistan/karasu-ile-1993-ten-gunumuz-ateskes-surecleri.htm> [With Karasu, the cease-fires from 1993 to now].

3. Cengiz Çandar, *Mezopotamya Ekspresi: Bir Tarih Yolculuğu* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2014), 546.

4. *Ibid.*, 532.

5. *Ibid.*, 547.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

Chapter 6

New Century, New Prospects, New Initiatives

The PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was almost certain that President Özal was assassinated by those who wanted to prevent the political settlement concerning the Kurdish question. He believed that Özal sincerely wanted a peaceful solution and was ready to engage with him for that purpose. Until the iconoclastic Özal, every single Turkish president and prime minister, since the foundation of the republic, had constructed and developed their political careers with the denial of the Kurdish identity in Turkey. Özal was the only exception, and consequently, he paid the price for stepping out the line on that issue with his life. In a country, where transparency was in scarcity and therefore, conspiracy theories were always rampant, the sudden death of the president at a crucial political crossroads would be attributed more to assassination than to natural death. Since Abdullah Öcalan was the one who voiced this possibility publicly, the Kurds became the first bloc to believe in it who were then followed by almost all the discontented segments of the society for various reasons.

ÖCALAN BELIEVES ÖZAL ASSASSINATED

The Kurdish question was such a taboo that, that regardless of the position or title, anybody who attempts to break it by pushing for a solution would be eliminated. That was exactly what happened to President Özal. He was assassinated.

That became the general conviction of Turkish public opinion. Özal was served lemonade at the opening ceremony of a painting exhibition an evening before his death. President of the Republic of Turkey, then, must have been

poisoned there. His family also subscribed to such allegations and gradually, the assassination as the cause of his death was presented as a fact.

During the first months of that fateful year, 1993, Uğur Mumcu, an influential Kemalist columnist of daily *Cumhuriyet* inquiring the allegedly secret relationship between the PKK and the (military) intelligence; Adnan Kahveci, a former minister in charge of economy who was close to Özal and had a high reputation for his decency; and General Eşref Bitlis, the commander of the gendarmerie forces that was the main fighting force against the PKK, who was known as an advocate of political settlement of the conflict and as the most trusted four-star general in the top brass of the military; had lost their lives under dubious circumstances. Mumcu was assassinated by a bomb placed in his car outside his home in late January (1993); Kahveci died in a car accident ten days after Mumcu's assassination, which some say was extremely suspicious and Gen. Bitlis, less than two weeks after Kahveci's accident, lost his life in a controversial plane crash on February 17th. On March 16, when the unilateral cease-fire of the PKK was over, yet, extended for an indefinite period with no conditions attached, Turgut Özal passed away. There was more than enough reason, in a political culture where conspiracies have almost become the norm, to associate the president's unexpected death with his quest to resolve the Kurdish question.

On the day of his funeral, after paying my respect in front of the imposing building of the Turkish parliament in Ankara where Özal's flag-draped casket laid on a catafalque, I entered the building. In front of the lift, by coincidence, I met a group of Kurdish members of parliament from a pro-Kurdish party. I had read the lamentations they had written in the notebook opened in the presidential palace for the deceased head of state. The lines that expressed their sentiments were the most compassionate in the book reflecting the fact that the Kurds were the most traumatized among all the other segments of the society by Özal's sudden and rather unexpected death. When I met them, I told them about this observation of mine. Yet their excitement had nothing to do with an affectionate encounter and the observation of a friend. One of them told me that they learned about Özal's death while they were with Öcalan at the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon, following the PKK leader's declaration of extending the cease-fire. It had been a shocking news to them. After a brief pause of disbelief, Öcalan said it was most probably an assassination and told his audience to inquire the real reason of Özal's death with me, that is, when they would be back to Turkey. He told them, "Find Cengiz Bey and ask him. He should be the person who would know, how and why Özal died." I responded that as far as I knew and also was convinced that the president's death was a natural one. "It was a heart attack," I insisted. I could not persuade the Kurdish members of parliament. They repeatedly told me that Öcalan believed that it was an assassination implying that I had to review

my knowledge and conviction. If Özal's death was a natural one, whatever I thought was of no importance. The presumption of his assassination would make Özal a victim of the Kurdish question, that is to say, his efforts to solve it. Thousands of lives were already lost concerning the Kurdish conflict, added to them was a president assassinated.

Not before long, "the assassinated president" would be vindicated because of his far-sightedness. He was extremely concerned about the return of violence that would take a heavy toll on human life, should the cease-fire collapse. That was exactly what happened.

THE WORST-CASE SCENARIO: THE BLOODBATH

In May, the Turkish parliament elected Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel to replace Turgut Özal as the president of the republic. Less than a month after his death, on May 24th, the worst-case scenario in Özal's mind occurred with the abrupt end of the already fragile cease-fire. In the east of Turkey, thirty-three off-duty and unarmed soldiers on their way for leave were ambushed on the highway. The PKK unit had put up the ambush and executed the unarmed soldiers in cold blood. The mutual blame game, accusing the other side for the breach of the cease-fire, began without losing any minute. There were even speculations that the Iranian and Syrian secret services that were unhappy about the possible reconciliation with the Kurds in Turkey were the real culprits behind the callous incident. The perpetrators of the bloody act have yet to be disclosed. It was one of those affairs that are designed to stay in mystery forever. Should the aim have been getting rid of the cease-fire conditions regarding the Kurdish issue in Turkey, it was certainly achieved. The irreparable damage was inflicted on the cease-fire and therefore, on the hopes for the settlement of the conflict through peaceful means. Trigger-happy belligerents were relieved. Violence was back, this time in unprecedented magnitudes, that is to say, no Kurdish rebellion had escalated it to this level since 1920s. Turkey's Kurdish conflict, from May 1993 to Öcalan's capture in Kenya and jailing in Turkey in February 1999, was starting its most sanguinary period. The operation that led to PKK leader's capture was widely believed to be facilitated by the American intelligence. Many innocent lives were lost due to the violence prevalent since 1984. Yet, with the capture of Öcalan, the violence temporarily stopped. Alongside the enormous toll on human life, tens of thousands of people have been uprooted from their homes and hometowns in the predominantly Kurdish Southeastern Turkey. Besides the destruction of countless livelihoods, a significant number of Kurdish settlements have been devastated and turned into ghost towns. A huge social wound was opened and never healed.

The highest casualty figures belong to 1984–1999 period, that is, from the day that the PKK kicked off its armed struggle on August 15, 1984, to the capture of Öcalan on February 15, 1999. Relatively speaking, the number of people killed in Turkey's Kurdish conflict is among the highest in global scale. While the fighting in Colombia has killed more than 220,000 in five decades, the casualty figures are climbing to 50,000 in three decades of the conflict related to the Kurdish issue in Turkey.

According to the Turkish Ministry of Defense, and military and police sources, between 1984 and 1999, 5,828 Turkish security officials, 5,390 civilians, and 19,786 PKK guerrillas have been killed.¹ These numbers can vary. In a different source, although the civilian casualties and that of security forces are very close to figures above, the casualty of PKK, for the same period, is indicated to be around 26,000. Approximately 4,000 villages were evacuated from 1987 to 1995. Until the initiation of peace processes within the first decade of the 2000s, casualty figures had climbed over 35,000.²

The estimates of the number of deaths caused by the fourteen-year Kurdish guerrilla war (1984–1999) against Turkish army—it has never turned into an inter-communal fight that it would be named as a civil war by all means—range from 29,000 to 37,000 (*Independent*, 14 November 1998:29,000; *Financial Times*, 14/15 November 1998 and *Guardian*, 14 November 1998:30,000; *International Herald Tribune*, 16 November 1998:30,000–37,000; *The Times*, 18 November 1998:37,000). The numbers given by human rights analysts are also between 30,000 and 37,000. From 2004 on, the casualty figures kept surging providing a further impulse for the initiation of the peace processes that began in the first decade of the mid-2000s. During the second decade of 2000s, the casualty figures climbed toward or well beyond 50,000.

WHAT IF ÖZAL WERE STILL ALIVE?

In the historiography of PKK, 1993 registered as the milestone concerning the beginning of the change in its ideology and objectives. Despite the fact that the conflict aggravated with the collapse of the cease-fire and entered into its bloodiest episode, 1993 registered as the date for rescinding to found an independent Kurdish nation-state by carving out territory from Turkey. The PKK, for the first time, gave signals that it could take part in a negotiated settlement.

By the same token, Özal's death inspired appraisals that should he have survived, the trajectory of the Kurdish issue would be very different. That is to say, a far-sighted statesman that acknowledged the priority of the matter



Figure 6.1 With President Turgut Özal and President of Czech Republic Václav Havel, September 1991, Prague. Havel signing his acclaimed book *Living in Truth* for the author. Source: Author's Personal Archive.

could introduce an ultimate solution. Therefore, his death at a crucial juncture of history came so unfortunate that it could be seen as a missed opportunity regarding the solution of the Kurdish issue. Later on, as a first-hand witness of the developments on the quest for resolving the Kurdish issue in 1993 and for some the closest person at the time of his death, I started thinking whether a peaceful settlement would be reachable had President Özal lived longer. For me, to think in such way and speculate was always wrong in terms of methodology. In my view, it is also ahistorical. What history registered was that Özal passed away in April 1993, and there was no peaceful resolution of the Kurdish issue. What if, he survived? It is impossible to know. What is known is that he did not. The unchangeable fact was his death and no evaluation or analysis could replace it.

Moreover, knowing that historians insist on a temporal as a crucial element for analyzing major developments and processes, getting into the shoes of a historian and examining the period that Özal left his mark, I am unwavering in my opinion that he would not be able to solve the issue despite many of his admirers choose to think otherwise. As I could attest, he was the only forthcoming person at the top levels of Turkish decision-making machinery looking for a possible reconciliation with the insurgent organization. Almost the entire Turkish state structure, from the military which possessed the Kurdish file from the foundation of the republic, to

the whole security bureaucracy of the government and the parliament, was positioned against a political settlement. Neither were they responsive to the complexities of the issue that demanded a permanent solution. Despite his reputation as a visionary and genial practical mind, Özal was not powerful enough to overcome the systemic resistance for a settlement. On the contrary, the last year of his rule, that is when he engaged with the Kurdish issue, has been, paradoxically, the weakest period of his political career. Furthermore, the PKK's position on a peaceful settlement was ambivalent. It was not fully committed to peace, nor was it politically mature enough to disarm its enemies, adversaries, and critics, and to exercise political flexibility. Extension of the cease-fire without a deadline or condition was the maximum Öcalan could offer, but even if Özal remained alive, it would be less-than-possible to predict how long it would hold before the president would prove that he is unable to deliver, in other words to put his dream into force. Albeit its significant position in PKK's historiography, in retrospect, Özal's death was perhaps not a missed opportunity for the resolution of the Kurdish question. Simple fact was that there was no viable opportunity. Turkey, then, was not ready.

A decade had to pass for Turkey to embark on a peace process to resolve the Kurdish issue, and a political leader in the caliber, strength, and ambition of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

ERDOĞAN: STRONGER THAN HIS PREDECESSORS

The opportunity for a peaceful resolution of the conflict presented itself as it has never been before during the reign of Erdoğan, as in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Unlike a weakened Özal when his strength was needed most, Erdoğan emerged as the most influential leader Turkey saw after Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey. No leader, including Atatürk, had amassed the power Erdoğan did. He, arguably, was stronger also than the founder of the Turkish nation-state. For a while, Erdoğan made a reputation tackling the Kurdish issue with audacity and tenacity in an unprecedented way surpassing even Özal. He was praised for his peace initiatives that inspired sanguinity for the resolution of the Kurdish question during the decade, 2005–2015.

The period that saw the establishment of Erdoğan's rule, the longest in the Republican history, coincided with dramatic developments in which the Kurdish issue would find itself, the most significant of all has been the capture of Öcalan in February 1999. Abdullah Öcalan was consequently condemned to serve aggravated life imprisonment on an island in the Marmara Sea, off the coast İstanbul and the guns were silent when Erdoğan took over.

GATES OF EUROPE OPENED

A development of almost equal importance was the open prospects for Turkey's European Union (EU)'s Helsinki Summit in December 1999, when the EU authorities declared open prospects for Turkey's integration. Turkey's eventual membership to EU could bring a lasting and equitable political settlement to the Kurdish issue conforming to European norms and principles and would crown its everlasting Western vocation.

In the eyes of some historians, Turkey always had a Western vocation. That has ever been the case since the year 1071, when the Seljukid Turks won against the Byzantine (Eastern Roman) Empire in the Battle of Manzikert. The Turkish victory is regarded as the opening up of the gates of Asia Minor (Anatolia) for the influx of Turks and the waves of migration that brought them from Central Asia culminated in the founding of the Ottoman Empire that replaced the Byzantine Empire over the territories it survived for more than a thousand years. The Ottoman Empire established Muslim-Turkish hegemony on Southeastern Europe and part of Central Europe which has been contained by two unsuccessful sieges on Vienna in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Ottoman Empire was called by the Europeans as Turkey, and the Turks, word used interchangeably with the Muslims, have become a part of the European history, be it as "the constituent other." Republican Turkey, in the wake of World War II, became a NATO member forming the southeastern flank of the Transatlantic Alliance alongside with Greece, thus anchored in the Western security system. It also wanted to integrate with the EU as a natural outcome of its centuries-old Western trajectory. However, Turkey's quest for full membership was hindered by a series of factors. The decades old Cyprus issue and the geopolitical rivalry on East Mediterranean had positioned Greece against Turkey. There were also disagreements on Turkey's less-than-compliant overall performance with the democratic norms. The most powerful country of the EU, Germany under the leadership of Helmut Kohl persistently rebuffed any Turkish rapprochement with the European body. The year 1998 witnessed a change of guard in the German government. The Christian Democrats left the government for the Social Democrat-Green coalition chaired by Gerhard Schröder as the new chancellor and Joschka Fischer as the foreign minister and vice-chancellor. The new power constellation in Berlin overhauled Germany's Turkey policy, and in the Helsinki Summit in December 1999, it has declared Turkey a candidate member to the EU with the same prerequisites applied to other candidates. If Turkey complied with the Copenhagen Criteria, a set of rules and regulations for the candidate countries, it would be able to start the negotiations for full membership not in a distant future. No country that had launched the accession talks was thwarted from full membership to the Union.

The year that Öcalan was captured and jailed, coincided with promising prospects for Turkey's eventual European integration. To comply with Copenhagen Criteria, the capital punishment that Öcalan has been convicted was removed from Turkish penal code and subsequently from the Constitution. Turkey implemented the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights on the matter. The road to Europe, which was also the road to peaceful settlement of the Kurdish conflict, was open. Turkey, could not, anyhow, be a member-state of the EU with an unresolved Kurdish question.

At the turn of the new millennium, the political climate surprisingly changed to Turkey's favor. It, also, received a significant boost from the sole superpower of the unipolar world, the United States. Bill Clinton visited Turkey in November 1999, the second American president after forty years of Dwight D. Eisenhower's visit to Ankara. Attributing exceptional importance to Turkey in shaping history, Clinton addressed Turkey's parliament session where he said:

For better and for worse, the events of that time, when the Ottoman Empire disintegrated, and a new Turkey arose, have shaped the history of this entire century. From Bulgaria to Albania, to Israel to Arabia, new nations were born and a century of conflict erupted from the turmoil of shifting borders, unrealized ambitions, and old hatreds, beginnings with the First Balkan War and the World War I, all the way today's struggles in the Middle East and in the former Yugoslavia. Turkey's past is the key to understanding the twentieth century. But, more importantly, I believe Turkey's future will be critical to shaping the twenty-first century.³

THE END OF THE "LOST DECADE"

Three years after Clinton's speech in the Turkish parliament, Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP as its Turkish acronym) took over. AKP was only one-year-old when it won the elections in November 2002 and had a parliamentary majority ended the decade-old period of unstable coalition governments in Turkey. Until the 2002 elections, the decade following Özal's era was dubbed as "the lost years" and while the previous year 2001, marked "the worst economic crisis of the Republican period" in Turkey. Under the prevailing circumstances of the time, the only element of luck for a new power-holder was the gravest conflict that had crippled the country, the Kurdish conflict, was in a lull, albeit temporarily.

Erdoğan, when emerged as Turkey's new leader, was in his late forties and was known as a devoted Islamist. He was the former mayor of the country's megapolis, İstanbul from 1994 until 1998, that is, when he was stripped from his position. Subsequently, he was imprisoned for four months

with a less-than-convincing accusation of reciting a poem to promote religious hatred. The poem was written almost a century ago by Ziya Gökalp, a thinker-poet considered to be the Godfather of Muslim-Turkish nationalism. Erdoğan, consequently, was banned from his post and any political position. When he became the chairman of the newly founded AKP in 2001, the party declared to be a market-friendly, pro-democracy conservative political party, repudiating to be the successor to the banned political Islamist parties that most of its founders, including Erdoğan, had served. Following the landslide victory in 2002 elections, the cofounder of the party, Abdullah Gül, became the prime minister and formed the first AKP government, that is, until Erdoğan's ban from political office was annulled. Winning a by-election, done to make him a parliament member and the prime minister, Erdoğan became the prime minister in March 2003, which coincided with the beginning of the U.S.-led coalition war in Iraq.

A NEW DECADE OF OPPORTUNITIES

With the beginning of 2003, Tayyip Erdoğan and his government, which was composed mainly of political Islamists inexperienced in governmental duties, was confronted by a hostile secularist ruling elite, yet, the country managed to make a fresh start in the new millennium, with meaningful Transatlantic support from America and Europe.

The Kurdish guns were silent since 1999. The PKK had announced another unilateral cease-fire. Under Öcalan's strict instructions, the PKK fighters had evacuated their positions in the mountains of Turkey's Kurdistan to withdraw beyond the border to northern Iraq, Iraqi Kurdistan. Heavy casualties inflicted upon the PKK units that were confronted by the Turkish army columns while crossing the plains. Apart from the losses in its military capacity, the PKK was in turmoil and the gravest political crisis of its history.

While the PKK was trying to recuperate from the trauma and organizational chaos incurred because of its leader's trial and heavy punishment, it was further sidelined with the developments following the American-led war on Iraq.

The fall of the Arab nationalist Baghdad regime of the tyrant Saddam Hussein emancipated the Kurds of Iraq. With the endorsement of United States and allies, the Kurdish leaders, Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, were elevated to positions of international stature, and transformed Iraq into a federal country with its quasi-independent Kurds enjoying self-rule. With such vertiginous developments in Turkey's backyard, the Turkish military, the institution that has been in charge of the "Kurdish file" since the early years of republic and had the final say in strategic and security matters of the

country fell afoul with its American counterpart, the Pentagon and therefore, the United States. Its relationship with the Pentagon has been considered as the mainstay of Turkish-U.S. relationship since the end of the World War II. The security component had always been the backbone of the close relationship between Ankara and Washington. The end of the Cold war had changed the threat perceptions and security priorities. The differences setting apart Turkey and the United States were, already, simmering. But, it is the war on Iraq where America found in Iraqi Kurds its staunch new allies, and, in return, with its military might endorsed the Kurdish self-rule next to Turkey's border that caused, perhaps, damage on Turkish military's perception of the United States. It also considered the United States as the main power in the legitimation of the Erdoğan government and that made it harbor a further bitterness against Washington. For the military, the traditional and self-appointed guardian of the Turkish republic, America was undermining its secularism and by pampering the Kurds in Iraq, paving the ground to an eventual dismemberment of Turkey.

Turkish military resented Erdoğan, abhorred Turkey's politically conscious Kurds, felt repugnant toward the Kurdish self-rule, and the notion of a Federal Iraq, thus bore a grudge against the United States that it saw as the power behind all those perceived evils.

Such veiled cleavages constituted the basis for the future openings of Erdoğan on the Kurdish issue, and the close economic and political ties he initiated at the end of the first decade of the 2000s with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Tayyip Erdoğan has been the Turkish prime minister and then, the president that most intensely involved in the peace process (*barış süreci* in Turkish) or, as some say, the resolution process (*çözüm süreci*, as it, alternately is referred in Turkish) with the PKK. It took place, in two stages, within a decade. The first stage was in total secrecy, in Oslo, the most favorite venue in the world to resolve the long-standing disputes.

NOTES

1. Başaran, *Frontline Turkey*, 31, footnote 56.
2. See "26 Yılın Kanlı Bilançosu," June 24, 2010, www.milliyet.com.tr/26-yili-n-kanli-bilancosu/guncel/haberdetay/24.06.2010/1254711/default.htm.
3. <https://clintonwhitehouse4.archives.gov/textonly/WH/New/html/19991115.html>.

Chapter 7

Road to Oslo, Contacts, and Back Channels

Oslo, Tayyip Erdoğan, the PKK! In the same sentence, these words imply an immense explosion. After the year 1993, Oslo was no longer just the name of a city. Its mention brought to mind far more than the capital of the Scandinavian kingdom of Norway. It now had the connotation of secret negotiations, synonymous with making a historic deal, achieving a breakthrough in the most insoluble political problems. Israel's secret negotiations with its perceived mortal enemy, the Palestine Liberation Organization—an entity that the Jewish state had forever labeled as terrorist and an enemy to be wiped out never to compromise—had taken place in Oslo. The Oslo Secret Track led to the Washington Agreement signed on the south lawn of the White House, where hundreds of millions of watchers across the globe witnessed the historic handshake between PLO chairman Yasir Arafat and Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin in the presence of the American president Bill Clinton.

SECRET REVEALED

On September 13, 2011, in a meeting of Turkish officials, one among them who had come to Oslo on behalf of Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan was heard telling his interlocutors, the officials of the PKK, that they should appreciate the courage and the considerable risk Erdoğan had undertaken, implying that they should be grateful to him. This person was Hakan Fidan, the deputy-undersecretary of the Prime Ministry, soon to be promoted to spy-master of Turkey as the new head of the MİT (National Intelligence). In the forty-seven-minute voice recording circulated on the internet, listeners could

easily deduce that the Turkish state was secretly negotiating or bargaining to reach a deal with the terrorist organization they had made people believe they were dedicated to crushing completely. Leaking such a voice recording—and then a couple of hours later deleting it from the internet—was a move apparently aimed at destroying Tayyip Erdoğan's political fortunes, and along with them any chance of reconciliation between the Turkish state and the PKK, assuming there really was an enterprise for that purpose in Oslo or elsewhere.

Almost two weeks after the broadcast of the voice recording and while speculation and accusations around the issue were escalating, in a live TV interview, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan defiantly conceded that he had instructed the director of National Intelligence, Emre Taner, to start negotiations with the PKK in Oslo. Responding to the questions of three pro-AKP journalists on Kanal 7, a television channel considered the mouthpiece of his government, he justified the talks with the aim of stopping the bloodshed and ending the terror (in the official parlance, an expression synonymous with blaming the PKK or the Kurdish insurgency).

Erdoğan made a distinction familiar to Turkish public opinion but difficult to comprehend for non-Turks, saying that the state rather than the government was involved, and that intelligence elements had been talking with the representatives of the terrorist organization—as has occurred in many other cases internationally. He mentioned he had held conversations with his Spanish counterpart (José Luis Rodríguez) Zapatero and British counterpart Tony Blair for that purpose, alluding to benefiting from the Spanish experience in dealing with ETA (Euskadi Ta Azkatasuna—Basque Homeland and Freedom) terror in the Basque question and the IRA-led violence in the Northern Ireland conflict.

In the Turkish political culture, the state was the organism that represented permanence, whereas the government, although in charge of running state affairs, was a political and temporary phenomenon. To end the terror was a legitimate ideal and a tall task that the state should undertake, and to achieve such an objective there would in theory be nothing wrong with speaking to the PKK. However, Erdoğan rejected the accusation directed by the main opposition party CHP (Republican People's Party) that the AKP and the PKK had signed a memorandum of understanding. The CHP had presented a document on September 18, alleged to be a memorandum of understanding from the Oslo secret talks. According to the CHP, the talks were conducted under the aegis of Britain and the memorandum of understanding between the two sides was in the British archives. Prime Minister Erdoğan pointed out that no text whatsoever had been signed by the Turkish officials who participated in the Oslo talks; therefore, no document binding on Turkey had been produced at the secret negotiations in the Norwegian capital. The CHP spokesman claimed the documents indicated that Erdoğan's and Öcalan's views were 90 to 95 percent identical.

Acrimonious diatribe between the prime minister and the main opposition actually helped bring to light a well-kept secret concerning the most crucial file of Turkish political history: a bold but risky enterprise aimed at resolving the Kurdish conflict.

If scrutinized in retrospect, revelation of the Oslo secret talks inflicted a mortal blow to the standing of Prime Minister Erdoğan, which had seemed to be at its peak when he garnered an astounding electoral victory with 50 percent of the vote and thus consolidated his power in June 2011. To be engaged in secret talks with the PKK was sufficient to be interpreted as high treason.

The source that revealed the Oslo secret talks and brought them into public knowledge was obscure and rightly aroused suspicion concerning its real intention. On September 13, 2011, a forty-seven-minute-long voice recording was uploaded at the video sharing site Vimeo.com by a social media account named “One Minute.” In listening to the recording, it could be understood that it was made at a meeting which had taken place in Oslo between PKK representatives and Turkish officials. One of the Turkish officials was Hakan Fidan, who at the time of the meeting was Deputy-Undersecretary of the Prime Ministry. As detailed in the recording, he was entrusted by Tayyip Erdoğan to participate and was there on behalf of the prime minister. Fidan, who later would take over the portfolio of Head of Turkish National Intelligence and assume charge of the Kurdish file, underlined that Erdoğan had taken a significant risk in the undertaking and that needed to be appreciated by his audience, the PKK representatives present in Oslo.

The explosive voice recording was immediately picked up by pro-PKK news agency Dicle Haber Ajansı (DİHA) and circulated. A few hours later DİHA withdrew the circulation, alleging the recording had been put into circulation through a cyberattack to which the news agency had been subjected. The source, a social media account named “One Minute,” disappeared, and with it the voice recording on Vimeo.com. A day later the daily *Taraf*, which had made a reputation as the media outlet publishing news regarded as security-sensitive, published the transcript of the voice recording in full text.

Thus, the secret engagement of Tayyip Erdoğan with the PKK had already been revealed. It was then the turn of the main opposition, the CHP, to corner Erdoğan and to imply he was set on a treasonous track.

POWER STRUGGLE OF THE “MODERATE ISLAMISTS” TO CONTROL THE STATE

Surprisingly, disclosing the secret talks with the PKK did not make the desired impact. Turkish public opinion, in general, not only remained indifferent to the accusations of betrayal leveled against Tayyip Erdoğan but also

displayed a measuredly supportive attitude. The general mood, more or less, was that if the talks would end the terror and violence and bring about a lasting peace by solving the problem, so be it.

Nevertheless, the Oslo secret talks were instrumental in the acute power struggle within the state structure that pitted Tayyip Erdoğan against Fethullah Gülen and his followers, a vast army of a secretive sect scattered in almost every corner of the globe. The nucleus and the backbone of the formidable strength of the Gülenist movement—adhering to Fethullah Gülen, a Sunni cleric with strong Turkish nationalist credentials—were embedded in the police, intelligence community, judiciary, and to a certain extent in the military. The carving of the Gülenist network into the architecture of the state earned it the allegorical characterization as “the parallel state.” Interestingly, it was the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan who used the term for the first time. The Gülen movement had been the main ally of the ruling AKP from 2002. The lines that separated the two Sunni (and in Western eyes, “moderate”) Islamist components of the Turkish government in the first decade of the 2000s were not quite discernible to outsiders. The Gülen movement, thanks to its holding key positions in the security apparatus and the judiciary, was for many years instrumental in safeguarding the Erdoğan government against a hostile secularist bureaucracy and the military. The implicit Sunni alliance gave way to incipient conflict, however, and an irreconcilable power struggle in 2011 as well as divergence on the Kurdish issue became the indicator and simultaneously the instrument of this schism.

The source that leaked the voice recording and thereby disclosed the Oslo secret talks was identified as the Gülenists. Murat Karayılan, the PKK’s highest official at large in 2011 and its top commander, was explicit in identifying the Gülenists as the source. Karayılan made his remarks to Turkish journalists in April 2013 at Mt. Qandil, the PKK’s headquarters in the territory of Kurdistan of Iraq, adjacent to Iran. This was the unique occasion when hundreds of Turkish journalists gathered on the mountain to hear Karayılan’s announcement on the withdrawal of the PKK fighters within Turkey to promote the peace process. Before Karayılan, a PKK official in Brussels, Zübeyir Aydar, who had participated all the rounds of the Oslo talks, in speaking to the BBC on September 2012 had also identified the Gülenists as the source that leaked the voice recording revealing the secret enterprise.

Mustafa Karasu, a member of the executive committee of the KCK (*Komala Civakên Kurdistan*, Kurdistan Communities Union), the umbrella organization of the PKK, which acts as its government, spoke to ANF, the PKK’s news agency. In a lengthy interview, Karasu, who also headed the PKK delegation in the Oslo secret talks, articulated on the role of the Gülenists (using Gülen’s first name Fethullah, he said *Fethullahçılar*) in the leakage of Oslo. He blamed the Gülenists, alleging that

in that period the most against the Oslo talks were Gülenists. Some circles were against acknowledging the PKK as representative of the Kurds, and they were on top of them. By leaking the [secret] talks, Gülenists wanted to obstruct any possibility in the future that the state or government would talk to the PKK. . . . For those, the PKK can only be talked to either to disarm it or about its surrender. For the resolution of the Kurdish question, autonomy, education in mother tongue, identity issues, and others do not need to be negotiated with the PKK; these are matters on which the state can act unilaterally. Those that hold these views are the ones that leaked the Oslo talks. We first were suspicious whether Israel was behind the leak or those who were mediating between us and the Turkish state, or Norway? Since we had not leaked it, naturally, we were suspicious about others. We could not find any reason why the Turkish state would do it. In a short while, we understood that it was the act of the Gülenists. The government also learned about it. It is definite. The leaking of Oslo secret talks influenced the later deterioration in the relations between the Gülenists and the AKP government.¹

With the dispute regarding talking to the PKK, the Kurdish question accelerated the incipient power struggle. The simmering contradictions between the two allegedly moderate Sunni-Islamist factions resulted in grave consequences that resonated beyond the borders of Turkey.

One of the most severe crises stemming from the power struggle over control of the state occurred in February 2012, when allegedly pro-Gülen elements in the judiciary started a prosecution that could end with the arrest of Turkish intelligence officials who had taken part in Oslo talks. Prime Minister Erdoğan interpreted the move as the beginning of a coup attempt eventually aiming to oust him, and counterattacked. The current Head of MİT and the former director and his deputy who had taken part in Oslo were instructed by Erdoğan not to comply with the demands of the prosecutor, who invited them for questioning. The standoff between the executive and judicial branches of the state ended with the adoption of a new MİT code in the Turkish parliament, with the votes of members belonging to the ruling party. However the bitterness remained, and the move of the Gülenists in the judiciary against those engaged in the Oslo talks further exacerbated the mutual rancor between the two Islamist factions trying to control the state apparatus. The confrontation triggered an acute power struggle which surged and reached well beyond Turkey, especially after the alleged and failed military coup attempt in July 2016, further poisoning American-Turkish relations with a corrosive impact particularly on Middle Eastern geopolitics.

The Kurdish question continued to play a decisive role in shaping Turkey's future, domestic politics, and foreign policy. To prevent war or replace it with peace has been a volatile and fragile gamble, as the Oslo talks would reveal.

Nobody involved in the Kurdish issue, irrespective of title, was immune to being labeled as a traitor, depending on the time and circumstances. That was why the Oslo talks had been a secret enterprise. When the veil of secrecy was lifted, the playing field would favor those who were against reconciliation with the Kurds and would facilitate the denouncement of the protagonists as traitors, blocking any chance of settlement.

The irony here is that while the Oslo talks were leaked for public knowledge with an aim to undermine Erdoğan as the initiator, the endeavor had ended in failure and yet the hatchets remained out. In September 2011, the Turkish security forces and the PKK fighters had locked horns in an escalating confrontation. As would be disclosed years later, the Oslo talks were in fact conducted between September 2008 and June 2011.

TALABANI ON SECRET CONTACTS

In September 2008, while I was in New York accompanying the president of Turkey Abdullah Gül to the annual meeting of the UN General Assembly, the president of Iraq Jalal Talabani confided in me the direct contact that was being made between the Turkish government and the PKK. Talabani had always had faith in me, for the role that I played in breaking Republican Turkey's taboo: construction of the relationship between Iraqi Kurdish leaders, hitherto treated as outlaws, and the president of Turkey in 1991. Talabani, at every turning point of the Kurdish issue, informed me about the developments and we exchanged opinions. While in New York, for the same purpose of attending the UN General Assembly, he invited me to his hotel in Lower Manhattan. Following a vibrant discussion with a number of Iraqi ministers on Middle Eastern issues, when we were left alone, he disclosed to me the secret: the Turkish government was meeting with the PKK, and he had played an essential role in the achievement of this enterprise. He did not elaborate on the issue and avoiding disclosing the fact that two sides were meeting in Oslo.

Years later, during my research in Sweden on the "Failed Kurdish Peace Processes" at the Stockholm University Institute for Turkish Studies, I would learn that the first secret meeting in Oslo between Turkish intelligence officials and a high-level delegation of the PKK took place on September 3–4, 2008. With that knowledge, I became aware that only three weeks after the first meeting in Oslo, I was privy to the information that secret contacts between Turkey and the PKK were underway. When Talabani disclosed to me the "big news," in the first instance, I had not grasped its importance. I remember responding to Talabani, "Because the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan is the captive of Turkey, the officials, especially the military top brass, could have been seeing him anytime they wanted, on the prison island where

Öcalan is serving his life imprisonment. İmralı is a military facility.” That was true but was a gross underestimation of the significance of the Oslo talks.

SECRET TALKS BEFORE OSLO

In reality, the secret Oslo talks did not represent the first ever secret contact between Turkish state officials and the PKK. President Özal could be listed as the first official to initiate contacts with the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, via Jalal Talabani as intermediary. To a certain extent, I was also an intermediary between Özal and Talabani. After Özal, as was leaked many years later, the Islamist prime minister Necmettin Erbakan sought contact with Öcalan via sending oral and written messages through certain intermediaries in 1996. The findings of my investigation and interviews with the people directly involved unearthed indirect contacts with the military in 1997. Those were the years with soaring casualties. The mysterious and striking contact that the Turkish General Staff established with the PKK leader in utmost secrecy is referenced in my report on the decommissioning of the PKK:

The third contact took place via the military officials who had played the lead role in removing the Erbakan government from the office. The contacts, initiated by the high-ranking commanders of the General Staff, can be called “indirect talks,” different from the two previous cases.

The initiatives of the General Staff addressed Abdullah Öcalan through Sabri Ok and Muzaffer Ayata, two leading members of the PKK who were in Bursa Prison in 1997.

I met Muzaffer Ayata in November 2010 in Berlin, years after his release from the Turkish prisons where he served 20 years, and a couple of years before he left Europe to settle in Mt. Qandil, in Iraqi Kurdistan. He spoke with me about the contacts made at the time when he was in the Bursa Prison in 1997. He said, he and Sabri Ok had been very much impressed with the level of knowledge on the Kurdish issue and in particular the analytical skills demonstrated by the military officials contacting them. They had therefore reached Abdullah Öcalan who was in Damascus at the time, and “persuaded their leader about the seriousness of the military officials.” Once Abdullah Öcalan was persuaded to talk to military officials, the contacts were made via a Syrian PKK officer who was in Europe back in time, and through a colonel sent to Europe from Turkey. According to Ayata, the military approached the PKK at a time when “Islamism was considered as the primary threat.” They (the generals) made sure that they were ready to negotiate any topic and everything with the PKK, provided that the PKK accepts the inviolability of the Turkish borders and its territorial integrity. For the generals, Turkey’s territorial integrity cannot be discussed whatsoever.

They were keen to focus on the growing threat of Islamism. Therefore they did not want to fight on other fronts so that they could concentrate their forces and energy on the immediate threat. They counted on the secularist character of the PKK in their approach. Those officials stipulated a declaration of ceasefire by the PKK as the pre-condition to start the talks and promised in return that the (military) operations against the PKK would cease.

In the notes from his meetings with his lawyers, released on 20 May 2011, Öcalan mentions the initiatives of the military as follows: “Karadayı [Chief-of-Staff (1994–98)] and Kıvrıkoğlu [Commander of the Land Forces (1997–98)], both wanted to limit the war. . . . said they could discuss everything related to a solution. So they also informed us.”

The talks initiated in 1997 with Abdullah Öcalan resulted in a declaration of ceasefire by Abdullah Öcalan on 1 September 1998.

Soon after the declaration of ceasefire, Abdullah Öcalan left Syria and was handed over to Turkish officials in Kenya on 15 February 1999, after which he was sent to the İmralı Prison.²

The contacts of the military with Öcalan continued in İmralı. From 1999 to 2005, Öcalan had only the military officials as his interlocutors for the state. However, the military officials who took part in talks with Öcalan between 2002 and 2005 were different from the previous military cadres.³ They were among the personnel of the Special Forces, a unit of the Turkish Armed Forces trained to crush the Kurdish insurgency and who held “hawkish” ideological views concerning the issue. They were arrested and charged with plotting to overthrow the elected government during the purges in the military. These purges, entitled as the “Ergenekon investigation,” began in 2007 and continued in full steam in 2008–2010. That was the period when the Gülen group, Erdoğan’s main ally, dominated the police intelligence apparatus and the judiciary, and they would later be blamed for plotting against the military with the Ergenekon case. As we will see in the following chapters, Erdoğan switched sides when the power struggle between himself and the Gülenists erupted. He released the Ergenekon convicts who were in jail and consequently allied with them against the Gülen group.

In the talks with Öcalan, the role of the Ergenekon faction of the military, the ultranationalists with an anti-Kurdish stance and a hostile position vis-à-vis the EU had already decreased in 2005, the year when Turkey received a date from the EU to start the accession negotiations. The MİT, with a new director who cooperated closely with Erdoğan, took over the task of talking with Öcalan and other PKK officials or pro-PKK Kurdish figures. That was also the period when the Iraqi Kurdish leader, Jalal Talabani, elected as the president of Iraq in 2006, stepped in once again as an intermediary between Turkey and the PKK.

The secret talks in Oslo were thus preceded by a long history of secret contacts with the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, and most of these contacts were initiated by the Turkish military, both before and after Öcalan's imprisonment.

ABDULLAH GÜL'S UNRECORDED PEACE EFFORT

Before Oslo, a significant yet never-recorded peace effort came from Turkey's Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül in mid-April 2007. This book has the privilege to disclose this attempt for the first time since I was personally involved in it. Gül had asked me whether I could travel to Ankara from İstanbul to discuss a sensitive issue in confidentiality. I obliged. Intuitively, I thought that the sensitive issue to be discussed in confidentiality could not be but the Kurdish question.

We met on March 16, 2007, in the residence of the Turkish foreign minister in Ankara, and our nightlong conversation extended into early hours of the next day. My intuition was confirmed. Abdullah Gül presented a relatively comprehensive plan to initiate an endeavor for the settlement of the PKK issue through the good offices of the Iraqi Kurdish leadership. At the time, the formal rapprochement between Ankara and Erbil had not yet started.

Gül's proposals contained points on which Turkey could display flexibility given that certain "red lines" were not crossed. He reassured me that his party and government did not carry the ideological burden that its predecessors had regarding the Kurdish question, and therefore they were more poised to take the initiative for a political settlement. He then asked me, given my long time engagements and the friendships I developed with the Kurdish leadership, if I would like to see how the wind blows in northern Iraq (Kurdistan Region of Iraq) and to check if the plan we had discussed sounds charming to the Kurdish leaders with whom I had mutual trust.

I did not turn his suggestion down outright, yet I was reluctant to undertake such an initiative. For me, getting involved with the Kurdish question, the most sensitive issue for Turkey's die-hard generals, in the way suggested by Gül, looked like a suicidal act given that I had no official or semi-official mandate for it. The AKP government did not look interested in providing this to me, and I had no interest in jeopardizing my life at that period. My good friend the Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink had been assassinated only a couple of months previously, in January 2007.

However, a week later Gül's overture materialized in a different way. I was in Beirut for a meeting with one of my best friends, Bakhtiar Amin, a Kurd from Kirkuk, who had served as Iraq's Minister for Human Rights in the post-Saddam Iraqi government. When I mentioned my conversation

with Gül, he was taken by the prospects and immediately called Nechirvan Barzani, the prime minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq in Erbil. Nechirvan was very much interested in what he heard from Bakhtiar and asked me whether I could make it to Erbil to address the matter face-to-face. I couldn't go to Erbil myself, but an extended summary of what I heard from Gül in the form of notes were carried by Bakhtiar to Iraqi Kurdistan.

In the meantime, Abdullah Gül was nominated by his party for president, for the elections to be held at the end of that month in the Turkish parliament. The source of the initiative, who wanted to address the Iraqi Kurdish leadership regarding the settlement of the Kurdish issue, had all of a sudden become the potential president of Turkey. Meanwhile, Bakhtiar managed to bring together the political bureaus of the two major parties of Kurdistan, which took Gül's suggestion seriously. The Kurdistan Democrat Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which rarely come together, met in Dukan, a lakeside town north of Sulaimaniyah, to prepare a goodwill letter to Gül. They also sent a joint delegation to Mt. Qandil to meet with the leaders of the PKK to arrange conditions for making Gül's scheme work with the help of the Iraqi Kurdish side. The PKK was also forthcoming.

Paradoxically though, Abdullah Gül's nomination to Presidency just a week after our conversation triggered such a political and constitutional crisis



Figure 7.1 With President Abdullah Gül in Isfahan, Iran, January 2011. The author was approached by Gül to carry a peace initiative to the Iraqi Kurds in 2007. *Source:* Author's Personal Archive.

in Turkey that the political agenda and the priorities of the Turkish political actors changed drastically. Gül's efforts at the time were left suspended in the air and soon overtaken by significant developments and postponed Gül believed in the prospects of a temperate peace process and made it his priority when he became the president of the Republic of Turkey. In his very first year in the office, he encouraged the government for taking steps for a peaceful solution and used his esteemed position to steer the public opinion toward peace. It should be listed as one of those missed opportunities in the history of the conflict, which interestingly has gone unrecorded. Bakhtiar Amin, who has retained the archive of the initiative, reminded me about it years later in Baghdad.

THE MILESTONE

In Brussels, in December 2010, I asked the two most senior PKK officials in Europe to compare the two periods of secret contacts, pre-Oslo and Oslo itself. The answer given by Zübeyir Aydar and Remzi Kartal was as follows: "What makes the talks held in the current period with Abdullah Öcalan [and those in Oslo] different from the previous ones [is that] the previous talks sought to dissolve the movement. . . . Both Aydar and Kartal were . . . in the Oslo talks. Their assessment was identical to what a high-level Turkish state official who also took part in the deliberations told me: 'The Turkish side [the state] failed to have and hold a plan. Reaching a solution was always sought by trying to divide the Kurdish side, Apo and the PKK. The state approached Öcalan with instrumentalist aims, trying to use him, rather than considering him as a party to the solution.'"⁴

Having the leader of the insurgency in their hands, as a captive, the Turkish state always had an asymmetric edge and a massive advantage in any negotiation conducted with the PKK. The conceptual gaps were almost impossible to bridge, and all the attempts employed in utmost secrecy did not yield any results for nearing the resolution of the conflict.

In this respect, rather than being a mere continuity of the futile efforts of the past, the Oslo talks were a very significant milestone in the quest for settlement of the Kurdish issue. The most striking difference with the previous enterprises was the involvement of an invaluable new element, "third party" involvement. The effort had international endorsement with credible international actors who started and took part in the peace process, not as mediators but as facilitators.

The international community had been encouraging the AKP government to undertake reforms. In this respect, addressing the Kurdish question had primary importance, resolution of which would further delegitimize the Turkish

military's meddling in politics; hence, the democratic-civilian rule would be enhanced. Some international institutions with the endorsement of Western governments and expertise on conflict resolution, as well as eminent political personalities, engaged with the belligerents of Turkey's Kurdish conflict with the objective of bringing them into dialogue and negotiation.

NORWAY: THE TRADITIONAL MEDIATOR AND HOST

The first endeavors to initiate a peace process for political settlement of the Kurdish issue go back to the year 2005. Former Norwegian prime minister and minister of foreign affairs Kjell Magne Bondavik could take pride in having made the initial steps. At an international meeting in Europe, he contacted then Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and told him the intention of his country to take the initiative to start peace talks between the belligerent parties of Turkey's Kurdish issue. Receiving a positive response from Erdoğan, who assigned Turkey's national intelligence chief Emre Taner to undertake the mission for further contacts, Bondavik met with PKK officials in Europe. Moreover, the Norwegian mediators went to the PKK's headquarters at Mt. Qandil on Iraqi Kurdistan's border with Iran to meet with the PKK leadership. The name of Kjell Magne Bondavik was never disclosed as taking the initial steps for the peace process, and his role has not been officially acknowledged until this date.

Given the expertise of Norway and its foreign ministry in secret diplomacy, mediation in reputedly insoluble conflicts and peacemaking, and providing the Oslo back channel for such efforts, it may not be considered as unexpected or accidental for a Norwegian prime minister to step forward to mediate between Turkey and its Kurdish nemesis, the PKK. Norwegian foreign policy concerning secret diplomacy and mediation in insoluble conflicts was, semi-jocularly, regarded as a primary "export commodity." Recall that Norway had made a decisive contribution in the Oslo back channel between the Israelis and the Palestinians that led to the signing of the historic peace agreement in Washington in 1993. PLO chairman Yasir Arafat as well as the Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin and foreign minister Shimon Peres were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their role in the Washington Agreement, facilitated through the Oslo back channel.

Assessment of "Why Norway" was brilliantly made by Norwegian scholar Hilde Henriksen Waage. Waage emphasized, "Ever since the turn of the century [twentieth] there had been a tradition of peace and mediation in Norway, symbolized above all by the explorer Fridjof Nansen. Another aspect that is often remarked upon is that Norway is a small country with

a positive image and reputation and no colonial past.”⁵ Twenty-five years later, Israeli-Palestinian agreement was in tatters, however; peace had eluded them. Nevertheless, the functioning of the Oslo Back Track had been sufficiently impressive to establish the reputation of Norway for confidentiality in mediation efforts for violent conflicts. The Colombia peace process that culminated in August 2016 in the final agreement to end one of the bloodiest conflicts of the twentieth century was unleashed in 2012, also in Oslo. Therefore, Norway’s involvement in providing the venue and logistical support for the negotiations to resolve Turkey’s Kurdish question, when evaluated in retrospect, should not be regarded as coincidental. The roles of individual initiatives and civil society activism were also noteworthy, because the Norwegian prime minister Bondevik was approached and influenced by a group of Norwegian intellectuals who were concerned with Kurdish rights, especially Prof. Kariane Westrheim from the University of Bergen.

Kjell Magne Bondevik (b. 1947), a Christian Democrat and Lutheran minister, was the longest-serving non-Labour Norwegian prime minister. He established the Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights in 2006 and continued his post-political career as a leading international figure in the domain of human rights. He defined the Oslo Center’s role as a peace mediator in conflict areas around the world. The Center cooperated closely with the Carter Center in Atlanta, United States, and the Crisis Management Initiative in Helsinki, of former president of Finland and Nobel Peace laureate Marti Ahtisaari. Bondevik brought in the Speaker of the Norwegian Parliament (Storting), Thornbjørn Jagland (b. 1950), as chairman of the board of the Oslo Center. Jagland, politically oriented at the opposite end of the spectrum from Bondevik, was a veteran Labour politician (Party Leader, 1992–2002) and his predecessor as prime minister of Norway (1996–97). Jagland, who also served as the Norwegian Foreign Minister, took part in Sri Lanka’s peace process between the government and the LTTE upon the request of the president of Sri Lanka. Following his naming as the chairman of the Board of the Oslo Center in 2006, he became the chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee. From 2009 on, he has been the secretary-general of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg.

The Norwegian channel for the resolution of Turkey’s Kurdish conflict was so instrumental that Turkish officials and a PKK delegation met face-to-face for the first time in Brussels on November 1, 2007. Bondevik and Jagland, two former prime ministers of Norway and partners at the Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights, arranged that meeting. The role of the two eminent international statesmen in bringing Turkish officials and the PKK representatives face-to-face has not revealed, that is, until today.

Despite the fact that the meeting was arranged through international political heavyweights like Bondevik and Jagland, the first ever face-to-face contact between Turkish intelligence officials at the highest level and the PKK representatives at the highest level in Europe did not go well. The Turkish side was represented by Emre Taner, the Head of MİT to whom Prime Minister Erdoğan had entrusted the “Kurdish file,” his deputy in charge of the PKK affairs in the intelligence organization, Ms. Afet Güneş, and another MİT operative. On the PKK side, Sabri Ok from the nomenklatura of the PKK; Adem Uzun, who then held the reputation of being the top diplomat of the PKK; and Zübeyir Aydar. Aydar was a former member of the Turkish parliament in affiliation with the pro-Kurdish Democracy Party, who then fled to Brussels under threat of arrest. There he joined the Kurdistan Parliament in Exile, which later became Kurdistan National Congress, a pan-Kurdish branch of the PKK. Aydar, in 2003, had served as the Head of the legislative organ of the PKK. The meeting, the first ever between the belligerents of Turkey’s Kurdish conflict, took place at the Crown Plaza Hotel adjacent to the Zaventem International Airport of Brussels, in complete secrecy. Unexpectedly, tension and exchanges of accusations dominated the encounter. Not achieving any breakthrough, following the fruitless meeting the contacts between the Turkish state and the PKK remained frozen for some time.

From 2006 to early 2008, there was a commotion of different channels aiming at mediation between the belligerent sides. The Head of Turkish Intelligence Emre Taner, who had the full confidence and support of Iraqi Kurdish leadership (both Barzani with his KDP and Talabani with his Patriotic Union of Kurdistan), engaged with Sabri Ok, a high-level PKK official who had been released from Turkish prisons after serving 20 years, alongside two other prominent Kurdish figures in the legal field, chairmen of the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party, Ahmet Türk, a veteran and respected Kurdish politician in Turkey, and Sırrı Sakık, a renowned Kurdish politician, elected to Turkish parliament who also served prison sentences several times. Taner, parallel to his contacts with Ok on the one hand, and the Türk–Sakık duo on the other, frequently exchanged information with Talabani who became the president of Iraq in April 2006. Bahros (Behruz) Galali, Talabani’s representative in Ankara (2000–2017), although low-profile, effectively took part in the peace initiatives during that period, meeting with Emre Taner frequently and implementing Jalal Talabani’s instructions. (Galali, in August 2017, was expelled from Ankara following the closure of PUK office in reaction to the capture of two Turkish intelligence officers by the PKK in the PUK-controlled zone of Iraqi Kurdistan. They had allegedly arrived in Sulaimaniya to kidnap the PKK leader Cemil Bayık and were instead ambushed by the PKK.)

Emre Taner also went to the prison island of Imrali to engage with imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. In the meantime, Ok and also Ahmet Türk and his colleagues were coordinating with the PKK leadership in Mt. Qandil.

All this was done unpublicized and in complete covertness. Taner's modus operandi during the year 2006 caused a certain consternation in the PKK team that was engaging with the Norwegian channel and another channel based in Geneva that had been involved since the very end of 2005.

TWO PARALLEL TRACKS

Until the beginning of 2008, the Turkish state and the PKK conducted their contacts with Norwegian intermediaries and with those in the Geneva-based channel, without Norway and Geneva knowing about each other's existence in the process. Norwegians were disappointed when they learned about the presence of another track and withdrew from their engagement temporarily at the end of 2007. Ankara preferred to continue with the Geneva-based channel. During that period, another institution working for peace and conflict resolution based in Spain also wanted to be involved. The name of former president of Finland, Nobel Peace laureate of 2008, Marti Ahtisaari, was also floating about. However, Ankara did not want him for reasons that are unclear. It preferred those affiliated with Geneva to lay the ground for talks which then moved to Oslo, with the Norwegian government providing the logistics and thereby acting as a facilitator. The Geneva-based group also served as the facilitator and acted as "the third eye" at the deliberations in the Norwegian capital. The Geneva-based group was more inclined to play the role of mediator in comparison to the Norwegians, who preferred to remain as facilitator.

When the secret talks were leaked to the internet, that "third eye" present in Oslo was presumed to be Britain. A lot of ammunition was thereby provided for subscribers to the conspiracy theories that abounded, spreading the view that the reconciliation effort between Erdoğan and the PKK was after all nothing but a British plot. Undoubtedly, via Britain, the United States was also implicated.

The leading protagonists affiliated to the Geneva-based channel were British subjects, but the Oslo secret talks were neither a British nor an American act, just as the original process between the Israelis and Palestinians whereby Oslo had earned its reputation as the capital of peacemaking was not an act of Washington either.

The indisputable fact was that, just like the Israelis and Palestinians, the roads of the Kurds and the Turks also crossed in Oslo.

NOTES

1. Mustafa Karasu, “AKP çözüm yaklaşımını geliştirmeli” (Karasu: AKP should develop an approach for resolution), *ANF News*, April 24, 2013. <https://anfturkce.com/guncel/karasu-akp-cozum-yaklasimini-gelistirmeli-18640>.
2. Çandar, *Leaving the Mountain*, 54–60. (Translated by the author himself from the Turkish original “*Dağdan İniş*”: *PKK Nasıl Silah Bırakır?*).
3. Çandar, *Leaving the Mountain*; see also ANF, “20 Mayıs 2011 tarihli İmralı Görüşme Notları” [The notes taken by Öcalan’s lawyers at their meeting with him at İmralı Prison on 20 May 2011], May 23, 2011, <https://anfturkce.com/guncel/Oecalan-in-avukatlari-aciklama-yapiyor-124784>.
4. Çandar, *Leaving the Mountain*.
5. Hilde Henriksen Waade, *Norwegians? Who Needs Norwegians?* (Oslo: The Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, November 2000), 86.

Chapter 8

Oslo, Talking in Secrecy

It was Wednesday, August 27, 2008, when two British nationals, one of them with Kurdish origin from Turkey, embarked on the Austrian Airlines flight from Vienna to Erbil, along with a high-level Norwegian diplomat and two Norwegian security details. From the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, they headed toward the mountainous Iranian frontier on the east. On August 29, they were in Mt. Qandil where the PKK was holding its 10th Congress. They had come to accompany the PKK delegates who would take part in the secret talks and to make sure that they reached Oslo safely.

In the entire PKK organization, only twelve people were informed about the upcoming secret contact that would take place with Turkish intelligence officials delegated for the task by Prime Minister Erdoğan. On August 30, the PKK officials who were privy to information on the Oslo track met for the last evaluation, and on the following day Mustafa Karasu and Nuriye Kesbir (better known by her codename Sozdar Avesta) left the Congress and then Mt. Qandil to join the five people representing two different channels of contacts between the PKK and the Turkish state, who were waiting for them in Erbil. The two British subjects involved in the Geneva-based channel had insisted on the participation of Murat Karayılan in the talks. In their eyes, with Karayılan, the representation of the PKK would be at its highest possible level, and this could help the eventual success of the talks. Karayılan, in addition to his political position, was the top commander of the PKK's armed units and therefore he was concerned for his security more than anything else. If he would accept to travel to Oslo, the Speaker of the Norwegian parliament Thörbjørn Jagland would accompany him all the way to assuage his concerns. However, Karayılan declined the offer and in his stead, Mustafa Karasu, one of the founders of the PKK and a member of the executive committee, along with Sozdar Avesta, considered the highest-ranking female PKK official, was

chosen to go to Oslo and join Zübeyir Aydar, Remzi Kartal, and Adem Uzun who would come from Brussels to form the PKK team.

The PKK officials who traveled from Mt. Qandil were provided with Norwegian travel documents and assisted by the accompanying Norwegians at the Vienna airport to pass the passport control to embark on the Vienna-Oslo flight. When the PKK team gathered in Oslo on September 2, the Turkish officials were not yet in the Norwegian capital. Waiting for their arrival, the people of the Geneva-based channel lost no time in organizing a seminar for the Kurdish side concerning “conflict resolution processes and negotiation techniques.” The task was undertaken by Jonathan Powell, Prime Minister Tony Blair’s chief-of-staff, the brilliant and experienced British negotiator with the IRA (Irish Republican Army) through Sinn Fein leaders Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, leading to the resolution of the Northern Ireland problem.

NORWEGIAN SHUTTLE AND GENEVAN INVOLVEMENT

The Norwegian shuttle between the Turkish authorities and the PKK leadership that had begun in 2005 continued throughout that year. At the end of 2005, a second channel was created in the mediation efforts between the Turkish state and the PKK. An institution based in Geneva with experience and expertise on conflict resolution worldwide and functioning with the support of influential Western capitals entered into the peace process track. In December 2005, they contacted the PKK’s European officials, informed them that they had met with Turkish officials and expressed their intention to go to Mt. Qandil to meet PKK leadership in order to launch a process for the peaceful political settlement of Turkey’s Kurdish problem.

The Geneva-based institution was none other than the Henri Dunant Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, known by its acronym HD. Its initiative was started by two British subjects, one of whom was from Turkey with Kurdish origins. Both figures were associated with the Kurdish Human Rights Project, a human rights organization founded in London in 1992. It had taken many cases of persecuted Kurds, mainly in Turkey, to the European Court of Human Rights and was well known by the Kurdish political circles in Europe.

During the annual Kurdish Conference at the European Parliament in Brussels in December 2005, those two British subjects affiliated with HD approached Adem Uzun, a leading figure of the PKK diplomacy in Europe, and conveyed to him their desire to mediate between Turkey and the PKK. They informed him that they had already contacted the Turkish officials and wanted to go to Mt. Qandil to talk with the PKK leadership. They reiterated that they were not acting on behalf of the Kurdish Human Rights Project,

but this time as representatives of the center in Geneva. Upon hearing this proposal, Uzun, who was involved in every step of the Norwegian track, traveled to Mt. Qandil to inform the PKK officials about the second European initiative, which was different from and not related to the Norwegian one. The PKK officials accepted the enterprise in principle.

THE THIRD PARTY: THE CENTRE IN GENEVA

That is how the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Geneva became involved in the Turkey-PKK dialogue and played a significant role in Oslo from 2008 to 2011. HD explained its mission as being to prevent, mitigate, and resolve armed conflicts, through dialogue and mediation. The Swiss-based organization, at the time of this writing, has been involved in dialogue and mediation initiatives in over twenty-five countries. Neither is Turkey mentioned among these countries, nor is the Turkey-PKK dialogue that took place over the course of three years listed among more than forty dialogue initiatives. In its mission statement, HD says:

Wars, uprisings, contested election outcomes, violent political transitions—every situation is unique. We find innovative solutions appropriate to each context. In some cases, we mediate directly between the main protagonists, providing a confidential space for them to explore options for a negotiated settlement. . . . One of HD's strengths is its ability to conduct confidential dialogue process. Confidentiality can provide an enabling environment for parties to begin addressing differences. It can also reduce the potential risks around negotiation, especially at an early stage in the process when publicity may jeopardise sensitive talks or the security of those taking part.¹

The Oslo secret talks thoroughly corresponded to the mission statement of HD; however, the organization has never acquiesced that it played a role in these talks. From many people who were in Oslo, I learned how, at what level, and who from the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Geneva was involved. But, those involved were extremely tight-lipped about confirming their presence and function in Oslo. Remaining faithful to confidentiality might be one reason for this, and perhaps it has more to do with their unyielding hope to revive their function in Oslo under new circumstances in the not very distant future. One of the people involved in secret Oslo talks on behalf of HD told me that for HD to acknowledge its role, the consent of both sides who participated in the talks was a prerequisite and that the Turkish side never gave its consent. States most often are not pleased with the presence of a “third party” that reminds the participants they are taking part in negotiations on

equal footing. States always want to preserve the asymmetric edge they possess against their adversaries, at the negotiation table.

HD has a multinational structure. But since its role regarding the Oslo talks have never been publicized, and leaked information had it that British nationals were on the stage, there was a false but widespread belief that Britain had been the “sponsor” of the dialogue between Turkey and the PKK and took part as “the third party” or “mediator” in Oslo. In the traditional conspiracy-oriented Turkish perception, that false belief amounted to considering MI6, in other words British intelligence, as the main culprit in the Oslo enterprise.

In 2011, the British nationals that are associated with the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Geneva initiated a London-based organization, Democratic Progress Institute (DPI), that I am a member of its Council of Experts. Focusing on comparative analysis of conflict resolution, the DPI organized meetings in the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland and Ireland, South Africa, the Philippines, and Colombia with the participation of Turkish and Kurdish members of parliament, journalists, and academicians from 2011 onward—that is to say, from the date of the collapse of the clandestine peace process that took place in Oslo, with the aim of looking for a possible revival of dialogue. “Never take no for an answer” has become the guiding principle of the DPI under the influence of Jonathan Powell, who played a significant role in the Northern Ireland peace process. Thus, the DPI obstinately kept contacting the Turkish officials and the channels were kept open with the PKK personalities who participated in the Oslo talks, in hopes that a day would come when they could resume the role the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue played between 2006 and 2011.

UNCOVERING OSLO

The most obscure period of secret talks between the Kurdish insurgent organization and Turkey’s officials has now been unveiled to a great extent. The secret contacts, talks, and negotiations that continued for nearly a decade were brought to light in August 2017 thanks to Amed Dicle’s book *2005–2015: Türkiye-PKK görüşmeleri* (2005–2015: Turkey-PKK talks) published by a pro-PKK publishing house in Germany, Mesopotamien Verlag und Vertrieb GmbH. Despite being penned from a pro-PKK angle, as the author concedes, by relying on the documents, minutes, and voice recordings of the talks provided to him by the PKK and interviews he conducted with the PKK personalities who took part in Oslo and its preparatory phase, Amed Dicle was able to uncover a large portion of the secretive period of peacemaking on Turkey’s Kurdish issue.

The ironic subtitle of his book *Kürt Sorununun Çözüm Sürecine “Çözüm Süreci” Operasyonu* (“Operation Resolution Process” against the resolution process of the Kurdish question) put the blame on the Turkish state. The author thereby implied that a colossal opportunity to achieve a political settlement was lost; the invaluable tools used during the peace process have since expired. Before the publication of his book, he shared his observations on the process with me, and some sensitive information he did not publish.

In addition to the data provided in Amed Dicle’s seminal book, the findings of the research that I conducted between 2016 and 2018 at the Stockholm University Institute for Turkish Studies revealed that prior to Oslo, Turkey and the PKK ventured into both indirect and face-to-face talks from 2005 to 2008 in different locations, including Brussels, Geneva, Ankara, and Suleimaniyah in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

The president of Iraq, Jalal Talabani, himself a Kurd, was actively involved during this period, especially in the time between 2006 and 2008. Parallel to Talabani’s efforts, the president of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq Masoud Barzani and his Kurdistan Democrat Party took part in some of the efforts toward settlement in 2006 and 2007.

In my interviews with them, the PKK delegations who took part in the Oslo deliberations emphasized the importance of the call the White House spokesperson made on August 15, 2006, on the twenty-second anniversary of the PKK’s armed struggle. The spokesperson expressed that the Kurdish question cannot be resolved through military means. The PKK side, with awareness of the symbolism of the date, read this as American endorsement of the efforts to bring the belligerents (Turkey and the PKK) to the negotiating table and thus were positively encouraged to take part in the talks.

The parties, in addition to their first face-to-face contact in Brussels in November 2007, got together face-to-face once again in Geneva in 2008 to lay the groundwork for the Oslo talks.

The Oslo process that started on September 3–4, 2008, brought the Turkish officials and PKK delegation to the negotiation table a total of eleven times. The two belligerents met four times in 2009, three times in 2010, three times in 2011 in Oslo, and once in 2010 in Brussels. Hakan Fidan, who in 2010 became the notorious head of Turkish intelligence and was delegated to hold talks with Abdullah Öcalan, participated in the Oslo-5 talks on September 13–14, 2009, in the capacity of deputy-undersecretary of the prime ministry but also on behalf of Tayyip Erdoğan.

These eleven talks that took place between September 2008 and June 2011, involving face-to-face encounters between Turkish high-level intelligence officers and a very high-level PKK delegation, were constructed on a background of multifaceted preparations that had taken place between 2005 and

2008. It was a significant endeavor, and a true milestone in the long history of Turkey's Kurdish question. The parties on the Turkish and Kurdish sides spent a total of twenty-two days together during the process, sharing the same location and getting together for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

The process involved prominent Norwegian statesmen and individuals affiliated with the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Geneva with expertise on conflict resolution, whose work was endorsed by major European governments, the president of Iraq and the leadership of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The Turkish officials who participated in the Oslo talks undertook the mission to facilitate the communication between the PKK leadership and its imprisoned leader. This was an unprecedented act, an exceptional novelty in the history of conflict resolution.

The Turkish and the PKK sides were, generally, represented by five people. The PKK delegation consisted of two leading figures coming all the way from Mt. Qandil joined by three leading PKK figures in Europe. Until the sixth meeting in Oslo that was held on May 2–3, 2010, Mustafa Karasu, a PKK founder and member of its executive board, chaired the PKK delegation. Losing hope for the success of the talks by mid-2010, the PKK side lowered the level of representation and Karasu did not attend the subsequent Oslo talks.

The Turkish delegation was consisted of five MİT (National Intelligence Organization) operatives and was chaired by Ms. Afet Güneş, a deputy-undersecretary of the organization who was in charge of its PKK desk for many years. Erdoğan's personal representative Hakan Fidan participated for the first time in Oslo-5, which was held on September 13–14, 2009, and then in Oslo-7, which took place on August 19–20, 2010, and chaired the Turkish delegation until the end of the process in his new capacity as the Head of Turkish National Intelligence.

THE FAILURE

For the Kurdish side, Oslo-10 held on May 12–13, 2011, was the most important of all the encounters, because in that meeting, the "third party" put its signature below the document interpreted by the PKK as a "memorandum of understanding." Furthermore, at this meeting, the three protocols prepared by Abdullah Öcalan to proceed toward a resolution were submitted to the Turkish side.

The government did not respond to the submitted protocols. Moreover, three days before the election date, on June 9, in a live television debate Prime Minister Erdoğan engaged in harsh polemics with the ultra-nationalist MHP (Nationalist Action Party) chairman Devlet Bahçeli—who had become

his closest ally by 2015—and accused the government Bahçeli had served as deputy prime minister during the capture of Öcalan in 1999 with showing a lenient attitude. If he (Erdoğan) had been in the government then, Erdoğan said, he would have implemented the court decision on the execution of Öcalan.

Dicle wrote, “The [peace] process [at Oslo] has ended. The response to the protocols submitted by Öcalan came from the highest authority in Ankara, Execution [of Abdullah Öcalan] by hanging. In a live television broadcast, it declared to the whole world that the PKK would be finished off.”²

Irrespective of all the bad omens, the formality of Oslo was preserved until almost a month after the general elections held on June 12. Öcalan had announced a deadline for the response to the protocols he had submitted, and that was July 12, a month after the election date. Oslo-11 took place one week before the deadline. On July 5, both sides got together for the last time. The Turkish side reminded the PKK delegation that they were waiting for the government’s response, and asked for patience. It was a short meeting without any commitment and not much hope raised for the future. Almost a week later, on July 14, the war resumed. What happened in the Diyarbakır countryside was not only a bloody confrontation that cost the lives of Turkish soldiers, it also the burial ceremony for the Oslo process, hitherto the most promising undertaking to achieve peace on the Kurdish question.

A prominent Kurdish player at the Oslo talks, Adem Uzun, in his 2014 assessment of the peace process entitled “Living Freedom”: The Evolution of the Kurdish Conflict in Turkey and the Efforts to Resolve It, published by the Berghof Foundation (a Berlin-based institution, which defines itself as an independent organization supporting prevention of political and social violence and achieving sustainable peace through conflict transformations), under the subtitle “Cessation of Dialogue,” wrote:

Within the framework of the peace talks, the government committee had accepted Öcalan’s proposal for a three-step process to resolve the conflict (ceasefire, constitutional reform, and normalization, with the PKK becoming a political actor in Turkey); a positive approach was expected after the general election in June 2011. However, using the death of the soldiers who were on a military operation in the Silvan region of Amed (Diyarbakır) and the DTK’s [*Demokratik Toplum Kongresi*, Democratic Society Congress, a pro-PKK front organization] as excuses, the AKP government declared, “Nothing will be the same as before, they will pay a heavy price: nobody should expect goodwill from us”—and implemented its long-planned policy of asymmetric war. From 27 June 2011, the government stopped meeting with Öcalan and also prevented him from meeting his lawyers and family. The government then used the state-controlled media to promote the idea that the “PKK had cut off the meetings.”³

The spirit and the substance of the Uzun's appraisal on the "cessation of the dialogue" reveal, in a sense, how deceitful the Oslo exercise had been and how far the positions of the two sides were from each other.

SHORTCOMINGS AND LESSONS

The major shortcoming of the Oslo talks that prevented it from evolving into a successful conclusion was the lack of real commitment on both sides for a political settlement. The two belligerents at the talks, as would be expected, entered into a blame game and accused each other for the failure of the most promising peace effort concerning the Kurdish issue until that date. But despite the peace effort by the good offices of Norway, the arduous task performed by the Geneva Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, and the silent yet meaningful support of influential international circles, the parties' profound lack of trust for each other hampered the progress of the talks toward a positive end from day one.

In addition to these flaws, fighting continued at levels to dispel any hopes that could be generated by the ongoing talks in Oslo. The waves of arrests targeting elected Kurdish mayors, human rights activists, and the party workers of pro-Kurdish political parties further aggravated the prevailing political climate concerning the Kurdish issue. It is noteworthy that the KCK (Koma Civakên Kurdistan in Kurdish—Kurdistan Communities Union, an umbrella organization at pan-Kurdistan level of all the parties and movements following Öcalan's lead) arrests, as they were widely referred to in Turkish political lexicon, commenced in mid-April 2009, following the stunning electoral success of allegedly pro-PKK Kurdish independent candidates in the local elections held in March. Their success was twice that of the previous election; the number of municipalities won by these candidates rose from 53 to 98, to the dismay of the ruling party which had predicted the opposite outcome.

In one of my interviews, Remzi Kartal, one of the leading PKK officials in Europe, told me about a bet he had concerning the local election results, with Afet Güneş who headed the Turkish delegation at the Oslo talks. Güneş was of the opinion that political power had made important inroads in the Kurdish-inhabited regions and thus the elections would end with a huge defeat for the pro-PKK independent candidates. After doubling their control of municipalities, which represented a substantial success for the independent candidates, the PKK—according to Kartal—interpreted the election result as meaning "the [Kurdish] people want political settlement" and declared cease-fire on April 13. A day later, the first wave of arrests targeting the mayors and the activists in the region began, demonstrating the hardliner stance within the Turkish state, which wanted to torpedo any progress on the road to political settlement.

The road to Oslo was full of bumps and obstacles, and was frequently interrupted by ravines. The role of a truly effective mediating third party was essential. However, according to the PKK delegation involved, the Turkish side was reluctant for the third party to take part in the deliberations. On July 3, 2008, in Geneva, at one of the preparatory meetings prior to the Oslo talks, when the “third party” HD people left the meeting room, Afet Güneş handed over to Zübeyir Aydar and Remzi Kartal an e-mail account and asked them to engage directly through it, bypassing the Geneva Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. The Kurdish side remained adamant regarding the presence of the Geneva-based people, which they described as the “third eye.”⁴ The same problem would come to the fore before the inauguration of the talks in Oslo. Güneş insisted that the “third party” could fulfill the logistical needs of the Kurdish side, but should not take an active part in the talks. She said that the Turkish delegation did not want to discuss the problem evaluated as Turkey’s own in front of the foreign lobbies.⁵ That was an apparent indication of Turkey’s obsession with the “foreign fingers” fomenting trouble since the foundation of the Republic in the 1920s. The first serious crisis in Oslo was averted at the expense of limiting the role of the third party to a considerable extent.

Accordingly, the third party present in Oslo did not reveal its position or make any judgment on the issues at stake. Those present in Oslo representing the Geneva organization attended the opening and closing moments of the sessions and prepared wording on what had been discussed. From the very beginning, the Turkish side had not been in favor of the organization’s participation. Thus, its role was confined mostly to the preparation of documents. All the texts phrased by the “third party” and mutually accepted were handed over to Turkish intelligence officials and the PKK representatives to be kept in the archives of all the parties present in Oslo. The Turkish side and the PKK also archived the voice recordings of the sessions in which they participated in Oslo.

The two completely different not to say conflicting versions of participation in the Oslo talks explain the inevitable failure of the process, despite the encouragement and contribution of multiple influential international actors as well as careful planning and groundwork.

THE TURKISH REVELATION

Emre Taner, the former head of Turkish intelligence (2005–2010) who is considered to be the main protagonist engaging with the PKK on behalf of Prime Minister Erdoğan, with the endorsement of President Abdullah Gül,

revealed the aim of the Turkish side concerning the undertaking. Speaking on November 9, 2016, to a parliamentary commission, Taner said:

We [Turkey] entered the Oslo process to prevent the foreigners from abusing the Kurdish problem. When we've investigated, we've seen very many foreign intelligence services were in close contact with the PKK and treating the issue as they like, as fitting their interests; while poor Turkey was watching as a bystander. I convinced the prime minister and the other officials that we needed to intervene, to remain face-to-face with that group [PKK], we had to resolve the problem, and should not leave it to the others. Their [foreigners'] intention was different. They wanted to carry the issue [Kurdish problem] to a multilateral international conference for its resolution. The resolution they wanted to reach was against our [Turkey's national] interests. That is the reason why we have been in Oslo. Oslo is not a betrayal, at all. Oslo is an undertaking to stop the bloodshed. Secret services enter into a minefield to clean it. [To fulfill such a task] is why secret services exist. Following the secret services, policymakers step in. [In Oslo] there has never been a protocol agreed upon, neither a signed agreement nor any contract. It has merely been an attempt to create a ground on which we could discuss the confidence-building measures. That was it. For the first time, I am explaining all these facts [regarding Oslo].⁶

Taner, who managed to conduct his engagement with the PKK between 2005 and 2010 in complete secrecy, in his first and only statement on the matter conceded that a major shortcoming on the part of the Turkish delegation, and one that led to the failure of Oslo, was the lack of a roadmap that could lead to a resolution: "We could not present a comprehensive roadmap to them [PKK]."⁷

Emre Taner is not only an essential figure concerning the role he played on behalf of Erdoğan in the preparation and the execution of the first significant peace process between Turkey and the PKK. He had the full confidence of the Iraqi Kurdish leadership, both Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, especially the latter with whom he cooperatively worked with to lay the ground for the initiation of the peace process. I heard very positive remarks from almost all the Kurdish leaders in Iraq about Taner's personality and the mission he had undertaken. The strong trust they placed on the head (the official title is Undersecretary) of Turkish intelligence led to the postponement of his retirement. He kept his portfolio from 2005 to 2010, until it was taken over by Hakan Fidan, groomed by Erdoğan and the ruling AKP to be Turkey's top intelligence officer. That further underlines the importance of Taner's remarks on the issue.

The revelation he made before a parliamentary commission more than five years after the failure of the Oslo talks exhibits an array of elements that

made the failure of those talks inevitable. It can be understood from his testimony that the Turkish side saw the PKK more as a tool at least potentially manipulated by foreign intelligence services, rather than the Kurdish insurgency itself. To block the foreign and hostile secret services from harming Turkey's national interests was the primary motivation of Emre Taner and his colleagues for stepping in. The intent to stop the bloodshed focused on achieving cease-fire with a maximalist objective to decommission the PKK.

REASONS FOR FAILURE: RECIPROCAL "SINS"

Taner's explanation revealed another major defect of the Oslo talks: the Turkish participants had no political mandate for an ultimate resolution. They were bureaucrats who were in charge of security, anti-terror, and espionage. For an issue like the Kurdish question, which essentially political in nature, security officials or intelligence operatives could undertake a mission at the beginning of a peace process, as the experiences in Northern Ireland and South Africa instruct. But they cannot carry the peace talks to the level of a political settlement.

Turkey's persistent disregard for the primary character of the Kurdish question was a major factor in the eventual failure of Oslo talks. For its part, PKK went to Oslo in disbelief about the Turkish side. That also was not a hopeful sign for the talks to bear a successful outcome.

Before going to Oslo in 2008, at their last meeting with the representatives of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, the PKK leaders disclosed a clear disbelief. They did not think that the Turkish state had any intention of a political settlement. Nevertheless, they decided to show up in Oslo, not because of any expectation they had from the Turkish side but to evaluate the talks as an occasion to present themselves to the international circles as genuinely interested in the political settlement of the Kurdish issue. They were keen to dispel the perception of the PKK as a terrorist organization.

Their conviction on Turkey's reluctance to negotiate seriously for the resolution of the conflict remained unchanged following the failure in Oslo, alongside the value that they continued to attach to the international powers, that is, the Western world. To create a positive impression of the PKK in the West became a guiding principle for the Kurdish organization regarding the Oslo talks. In the aftermath of the failed talks, the head of the PKK delegation at Oslo, Mustafa Karasu, in his assessment observed:

In fact, the Leadership [Abdullah Öcalan] and we, as the Movement [the PKK], were aware that the AKP and the state were not ready for any solution. We acted probing, by softening the climate, whether we can prepare the [Turkish] society

and the state for a resolution, and on this basis to bring the AKP into the peace process. During the talks at Oslo, it was clear that they [the Turkish side] did not have any concrete policies for the resolution [of the Kurdish conflict]. We also adopted an approach to demonstrate to the international powers that we were for the resolution and with such a message to have them onboard for supporting the peace process.

The PKK officials believed that

The Oslo process has a character that goes far beyond Turkey and the region [Kurdistan and the Middle East], because the intermediary for these talks, the center in Geneva has the support of United Nations, United States, European Union and Britain. Therefore, all these powers were aware of the talks and endorsed the process.⁸

A similar assessment was disclosed to me by those who participated in the Oslo talks on behalf of the PKK.⁹ Mollifying the international community had seemingly become more of a driver for the PKK in entering the Oslo process, than reaching a settlement with the Turkish side, a hope that looked unwarranted.¹⁰

The PKK's decision to carry on and escalate the armed struggle during the talks was not helpful to overcome the Turkish side's unpreparedness for a breakthrough. Mustafa Karasu, who led the PKK delegation in the first half of the Oslo talks, revealed:

Even though there has not been any policy of the state for resolution, we continued the Oslo talks persistently. When no result was achieved, we started the Revolutionary People's War on May 31, 2010. We had seen that the AKP has no policy for the resolution [of the Kurdish question] during the talks in 2008, 2009, and 2010.¹¹

Although he emphasized the episodes during which the PKK manifested its flexibility by unilateral cease-fires and mitigation that enabled the elections to be held in a relatively tranquil atmosphere, the unending emphasis on resorting to Revolutionary People's War while the talks in Oslo were underway was by no means conducive to efforts to achieve a peaceful settlement of the conflict.

In retrospect, due to its major pitfalls, and despite meeting many of the prerequisites for a successful peace process as evidenced by various practices in the world, the failure of the Oslo process would appear inevitable. Yet, its end in July 2011 came abruptly and quite unexpectedly, only one month after the dazzling electoral success of the ruling AKP.

ERDOĞAN WON, PEACE PROCESS LOST

Garnering the support of 50 percent of the electorate and incontestably consolidating his power, two roads lay ahead of Tayyip Erdoğan: with enhanced self-confidence to proceed with reforms and improve Turkey's imperfect democracy, further freeing it from the tutelage of the weakened military—or to drift toward authoritarian rule, with the same enhanced self-confidence, monopolizing power in his own hands. He took the second track. Opting for the former might have been more helpful for the resolution of the Kurdish question, and a democratic governance on the road to EU accession would certainly have proven more conducive to such an end. Taking, gradually but surely, the authoritarian and more centralized trajectory was in contradiction with an issue requiring a decentralized system in which the devolution of power was a necessary step toward for an ultimate resolution.

Emboldened by his election victory, Tayyip Erdoğan ended the Oslo process on a flimsy pretext. An encounter between an advancing military column and PKK fighters in Silvan, in the Diyarbakır countryside in southeastern Turkey, which took the lives of thirteen soldiers, was interpreted as reigniting the war.

Mustafa Karasu, in his appraisal of the failed peace processes, offered a similar account:

He [Erdoğan] won around 50 percent of the votes and felt stronger. . . . He refrained from taking any binding decision [on the resolution of the Kurdish question]. That demeanor was not different during 2008 and 2009, but following the 2011 elections when he sensed he is even stronger, he did not take part in the Oslo talks anymore and he did not take them seriously either. . . . Silvan was coincidental; we had not issued any operational instructions for that to happen. [At this point, Karasu alleged that even before the elections 60 guerrillas were, in his words, martyred.] The military operations [conducted by the government against the PKK] were already there. The [Oslo] process had already been derailed [before the elections]. After the elections, [the government] did not come to Oslo for talks, nor took any step [regarding the resolution of the Kurdish problem]. With Silvan, it made it a pretext [to terminate the talks completely] and started the offensive. If it had a will for resolution, with only Silvan, everything would not turn upside down. . . . After the elections, the AKP government feeling stronger than ever, implemented the policy of suppressing the Kurdish Freedom Movement [the metaphor used by its staunch supporters to imply the PKK and the constellation around it]. It started even before the elections and right after the elections, they began to make reference to the Sri Lanka model.¹²

Interpretations of what halted and ultimately terminated the Oslo process and what actually happened in Silvan aside, the most promising endeavor for peace between Turkey and the Kurdish insurgency initiated by the PKK had ended in dismal failure. The table at which the Turkish state officials and the PKK's prominent figures had sat face-to-face was overturned and the swords were out of their sheaths.

Between Turkey and the Kurds, the state of peace appeared as a variable. Once again, it became clear it was war that has always been the constant. By the hot summer of 2011, peace efforts had failed.

NOTES

1. <https://www.hdcentre.org/what-we-do/mediation-and-dialogue>.
2. Ibid.
3. Adem Uzun, *“Living Freedom”: The Evolution of the Kurdish Conflict in Turkey and the Efforts to Resolve It* (Berlin: Berghof Transition Series no. 11), 29.
4. Amed Dicle, *2005–2015 Türkiye-PKK Görüşmeleri* [2005–2015 Turkey–PKK negotiations] (Neuss: Mezopotamya Yayınları, 2017), 67.
5. Ibid., 82–83.
6. Tutanak, 9 November 2016, https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/develop/owa/komisyon_tutanaklari.goruntule?pTutanakId=1775, 125.
7. Ibid.
8. Dicle, *2005–2015 Türkiye-PKK Görüşmeleri*, 73.
9. Karasu, “AKP çözüm yaklaşımını geliştirmeli.”
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.

Chapter 9

Erdoğan's Dance with Öcalan

Peace Process in Public

December 5, 2012. Walking in the corridors of the European Parliament in Brussels for the closing session of the annual Kurdish conference, the leading PKK official in Europe, Zübeyir Aydar, grabbed my arm and asked, “Do you have anything, you should tell me, that I have to know before you leave?” As he had done in almost all the previous years, he would end the conference with a closing statement. I would not stay until the end. I had a plane to catch for İstanbul and would be leaving together with Leyla Zana, whom I used to call “The Kurdish La Passionaria.” Zana was one of the sponsors of the conference along with the South African legend Desmond Tutu, and a recipient of numerous international awards, including the Sakharov Prize. She had spent more ten years in Turkish prison from December 1994. The night before, all the conference participants were dining together, a gathering I had to interrupt to leave and meet the Turkish justice minister Sadullah Ergin, who was in Brussels for a different purpose. Our appointment was arranged by Osman Kavala, the leading philanthropist in Turkey and a tireless peace activist. His arrest by the Erdoğan regime in 2017 and imprisonment without any indictment for over a year would cause widespread indignation in the international arena. Back then I was working closely with Osman to revive the peace process that had been dead since the summer of 2011. The meeting with Mr. Ergin was a confidential one. He was a founding member of the ruling AKP and had been the justice minister in Erdoğan’s cabinet since 2009. He had also made a reputation as a decent man, an upholder of the rule of law, and eventually was removed from his post in a government reshuffle in 2013 following the corruption scandal that rocked the government, with implications reaching to Erdoğan’s household. Ergin had lost the favor of Erdoğan and was sidelined.

In the meeting with myself and Osman Kavala, Ergin broke the news that we were not expecting to hear at that moment: very exciting and encouraging news. Without elaborating, he disclosed to me that the resumption of the peace process was very close. The upcoming process would be centered around Abdullah Öcalan, and the organization, that is to say the leadership on Mt. Qandil, would be included in later stages. Ergin reminded us that the new process would move on very thin ice; he was wary of provocateurs in both camps that would attempt to derail it. Most importantly, if Erdoğan lost faith in the process, then it would be postponed indefinitely, since Turkey would be entering into a cycle of successive elections: local and presidential in 2014, and the general elections in 2015. Therefore, keeping Erdoğan on board would enhance the likelihood that the peace process would be resilient against probable provocations and would move forward. We told Justice Minister Ergin that we would go back to the dinner we were having with, among others, Zübeyir Aydar and Remzi Kartal, and break the news to them. So we did. My response to Aydar's question the very next day was brief. "We will soon hear of the resumption of the peace process, as I told you last night," I said. Yet, I underlined, "You must tell the people on Mt. Qandil that they will be involved later. They have to wait patiently and be very sensitive to any sort of provocative act. The government will directly address Abdullah Öcalan in the first stage."

WORKING WITH ÖCALAN AS A PEACEMAKER

At that period, such news was too good to be true. However, it had become public knowledge after only three weeks, and in a way that I would not have expected. During the closing days of 2012, Prime Minister Erdoğan, in a television interview broadcast live and aimed as a review of the past year, disclosed that a new Kurdish peace process was about to take off and this time it would start with a dialogue with Abdullah Öcalan in İmralı prison. Unlike the secrecy of the previous peace process, the new effort was unleashed with a public announcement and contrary to Oslo, it seemed very promising. That is, initially.

The previously failed process in Oslo had a very different starting point, stemming largely from the hopeful circumstances in which it was widely believed that Turkey would find its place in the European Union with a new, popular, and reformist government seemingly committed to the EU, and that was perceived by the Western world as moderately Islamist. Under the international climate of the post-9/11 period, Turkey, as a country anchored to the West through NATO and proceeding toward accession to the EU, was needed by the international system to serve as a role model for the Muslim world to

counter the appeal of extremist jihadist trends represented by al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and their ilk. The perceived moderate Islamist identity of the new AKP government was seen as a blessing. It had to be supported against the whims of Turkey's diehard secularists embedded in the powerful military and the other central institutions of the state. The survival and sustainability of the AKP government depended as much on keeping the military in its barracks and diminishing its influence, as on the government's economic success and the American and European endorsement it obtained. The civilian initiative for the settlement of the Kurdish issue would pull the rug from under the feet of the military, which had always monopolized the Kurdish file. The Oslo process had thus been nourished by Western encouragement for the AKP government and the PKK, during the first decade of the 2000s.

THREE REASONS FOR LAUNCHING THE PEACE PROCESS

The new peace process that was unleashed by Prime Minister Erdoğan in a television interview on December 27, 2012, was set in motion by the unprecedented visit of two Kurdish members of the Turkish parliament to İmralı prison to see Öcalan and carry his message. While the international circumstances and a new power constellation in Turkey had laid the ground for a Kurdish peace process that culminated in Oslo, this new attempt came from somewhere quite different. Three main reasons lay behind Erdoğan's intention to resume the defunct Kurdish peace process.

The first was the escalation of violence in Turkey after the breakdown of Oslo. The violence that engulfed especially the overwhelmingly Kurdish-inhabited eastern and southeastern provinces jeopardized the election security. Turkey was entering a cycle of elections beginning with local elections in March 2014, to be followed by presidential elections in August 2015 in which for the first time the president would be elected by popular vote, and then general elections scheduled for June 2015. Prime Minister Erdoğan had laid his plans for the executive presidency, and for that, he needed drastic constitutional amendments to transform Turkey's governance from a parliamentary system to a presidential one. He required a relatively tranquil political climate where the elections could take place in security and without any question of legitimacy, to promote his political agenda.

Second, the escalating violence related to the Kurdish conflict coincided with the deteriorating military situation on the Syrian battlefield, next door to Turkey's Kurdish-inhabited regions, where PKK's Syrian affiliate PYD (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, Democratic Union Party) and its armed wing YPG (*Yêkineyên Parastina Gel*, People's Protection Units) had emerged as a

significant political and military player. Following the withdrawal of Syrian army from the Kurdish-inhabited regions along Syria's 911-kilometer frontier with Turkey in July 2012, Kurdish self-rule was exercised in the three cantons extending from northeast to northwest on the Syrian side of the border. The advances of the PKK's Syrian affiliate in the proximity of Turkey's southeast was envisaged as the PKK's gaining a strategic hinterland such as it had never had.

Lastly, hundreds of PKK prisoners started hunger strikes in Turkish jails across the country, which could only be stopped by their leader, Abdullah Öcalan, also serving a life sentence in İmralı prison. The hunger strikes of the political prisoners affiliated with the PKK and its sister organization PAJK (*Partiya Azadiya Jinên Kurdistan*, Kurdistan Free Women Party) started on September 12, 2012. The hunger strikers had two demands: lifting the isolation imposed upon Abdullah Öcalan in his prison cell, and freedom to use the Kurdish language in the public sphere. The hunger strikes spread to prisons countrywide in wave after wave, until hundreds if not thousands of Kurdish prisoners were participating. Many prisoners were at the brink of death or suffered permanent physical damage, and only at this point did the public conscience play in. Abdullah Öcalan was considered as the sole authoritative voice to halt the hunger strike; thus the government sought his cooperation to end this increasingly unsustainable situation. On November 7, the sixty-eighth day of the hunger strike, Abdullah Öcalan issued an instruction through his brother who came to visit him, stressing, "The hunger strike has reached its objective, and it should end without any hesitancy on the part of those who participated."¹

Abdullah Öcalan's intervention in ending the wave of hunger strikes by Kurdish prisoners, which were approaching irremediable consequences, proved to be decisive and demonstrated to the government that he was the person to be an effective partner in any Kurdish peace process that would be initiated. Öcalan's role in ending the hunger strike both facilitated and accelerated the resumption of the peace process.

The increasing violence coupled with the deteriorating military situation on the Syrian battlefield had prompted the Turkish government to search for ways to revive the process during the summer of 2012. A series of Crisis Group reports summarized the situation:

Since large-scale hostilities with the PKK resumed in summer 2011, Turkey has experienced the worst fighting since it captured and jailed the insurgency's leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in 1999. According to an informal minimum tally of official statistics maintained by Crisis Group since the 12 June 2011 parliamentary elections, 711 people had been killed by mid-August 2012, including 222 soldiers, police and village guard militia, 405 PKK fighters and 84 civilians.

This is four times more deaths than in 2009 and far more than the annual figures in 2000–2004, when the PKK was implementing a unilateral ceasefire. Hopes have been dashed of ending a conflict that has already cost the economy \$300 billion–\$450 billion and killed 30,000–40,000 people since 1984. Serious tensions have returned to the southeast, reversing a decade-long trend toward more normal daily life. In July, for example, Hakkari's four-year-old university stopped night classes because students commuting from rural areas were too fearful to attend.²

THE MANDELA CASE: INSPIRATION FOR ÖCALAN

After an intermission of one and a half years, it was time to go back to peace talks. The door of Iraqi president Jalal Talabani was knocked on again. His good offices were needed. He met with Turkey's intelligence chief Hakan Fidan who paid a secret visit to Berlin where Talabani was undergoing physiotherapy treatment in August 2013. The Iraqi president contacted the PKK leadership on Mt. Qandil, which is situated in northeastern Iraq within the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) region. Talabani's role in reviving the Kurdish peace process in Turkey was limited and exceptional; unlike the first peace process where prominent international figures, institutions, and foreign governments had played a significant role, the new peace process was mostly a domestic Turkish national product. In a way, it was reminiscent of the South African experience concerning which one of its chief protagonists, the last white president F. W. de Klerk, emphasized its homegrown character to explain its success. De Klerk said that "the strength of the South African process was that it did not require—or seek—foreign mediation. One of the sources of a process was that it was entirely 'homegrown.'"³

F. W. de Klerk's observation regarding the strength of the South African process is far from comprehensive. There are other arguments that underline the endeavor of the African National Congress (ANC) for maintaining an international embargo against the apartheid regime in Pretoria. In that sense, the argument goes that the "third party" has always been present concerning the South African conflict in the form of the international system implementing embargo against the apartheid regime.

The real similarity of the new Kurdish process to the South African example was that it was constructed directly on Abdullah Öcalan who was serving life sentence on a prison island close to İstanbul implicitly recognizing him as the PKK's chief negotiator. Such a role was not fundamentally different from that played by the South African leader Nelson Mandela while he was serving a similar punishment on Robben Island off the coast of Cape Town.

Elevating Öcalan to the status of *de facto* chief negotiator met the most important precondition of the PKK to engage with the Turkish state in order to achieve a political settlement. For many years, the PKK leadership at Mt. Qandil had insisted that Öcalan should have been recognized as their chief negotiator. That was the stance they took before the start of the secret talks at Oslo. The Oslo process was able to start in 2008 only when the PKK's adamant position that they would not embark on any process without Öcalan's approval had been overcome. After intense negotiations and bargaining carried out by the "third party," the one affiliated with the center in Geneva, a trilateral mechanism including Mt. Qandil, İmralı Prison, and Ankara was established. According to that mechanism, the Turkish officials would meet Öcalan at İmralı, obtain from him a letter on his views about the talks, carry it to Oslo, and hand it over to the PKK delegation. At the end of the sessions, the Turkish intelligence officials would carry the letter written by the PKK's Oslo participants back to Öcalan. Hence, Öcalan was indirectly involved with the Oslo Talks and oddly, the Turkish intelligence outfit MİT functioned as an intermediary between the PKK's uncontested leader and its executive.

One aspect of that insistence undoubtedly had to do with the personality cult the PKK had built for its leader, but it had more to do with raising Öcalan to a role that would legitimize him and enable his ultimate release from prison. Nelson Mandela and the experience of South Africa set the precedent for this. Mandela had served an 18-year prison term on Robben Island, and was then moved to Cape Town prisons with much better conditions of captivity. In this period, he started to negotiate with the white government of South Africa for ending apartheid, until his release in 1990. Mandela had been 44 years old when he was arrested for conspiring to overthrow the state, condemned to life imprisonment, and sent to Robben Island. Öcalan was 50 when he was condemned under similar charges and sent to serve his life imprisonment on İmralı Island near İstanbul. The parallels between Mandela and Öcalan were already in the minds of PKK cadres—and as for the analogy, they were also influenced by the ANC. In fact, the PKK has enjoyed close relations with the ANC for quite a long period.

ÖCALAN ON MANDELA

Abdullah Öcalan also took Mandela's case as his reference point when he embarked on the peace process as the PKK's *de facto* chief negotiator. The minutes of the dialogues he held (in the presence of a state official) with different delegations of the pro-Kurdish BDP (Peace and Democracy Party) in İmralı were published in November 2015. The BDP, the precursor of the

HDP (Peoples' Democracy Party), was acting as go-between for Öcalan and the PKK leadership on Mt. Qandil. The BDP representatives, who were mostly members of the Turkish parliament, took notes of their meetings with the PKK leader and handed them over to the officials on Mt. Qandil. Their talks with the PKK officials at headquarters were verbally transmitted to Öcalan when they got back to Turkey. A selection of the minutes of the İmralı dialogues between Öcalan and the Kurdish politicians was published by the Mt. Qandil leadership through a pro-PKK publishing house in Germany following the collapse of the peace process. A BDP (later HDP) deputy who took part in those dialogues and made frequent visits to the PKK headquarters told me that, although the published minutes do not cover all the talks at İmralı, they are accurate.

On October 14, 2013, Abdullah Öcalan dictated the following to the visiting delegation as his instructions:

Write down the agenda of our meeting.

Revisiting the Mandela example: At the beginning of 1990, South Africa faced a historical dilemma: Either a further deepening civil war or comprehensive negotiations [for a settlement]. There were those two options, and from those two options common sense came out. To avoid the further deepening of war, Mandela was released. My situation is the same. I am also in a similar process for four years. Either negotiated settlement or civil war. The issues, processes, and the countries [South Africa and Turkey] resemble each other very much.⁴

When Öcalan made such a comparison, he had been on İmralı prison island for fourteen years, and there he most probably had read the riveting memoir and autobiography of Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*. Parts 9 and 10 of that work, respectively entitled "Robben Island: Beginning to Hope" and "Talking with the Enemy," recount how Mandela moved from Robben Island where he had been for eighteen years to Pollsmoor Security Prison in the outskirts of Cape Town, with much better facilities. After two years in Pollsmoor, the living conditions of Mandela further improved, turning into a semi-open custody whereby he enjoyed rides outside the prison complex around Cape Town, and received visitors including international dignitaries under much better circumstances. In his fourth year, he began to meet with the justice minister of the apartheid regime, and in the fifth, he began negotiating with a secret committee made up of the highest intelligence officials of the then South African government that extended into his sixth year in Pollsmoor. Almost seven years after his transfer from Robben Island, in December 1988, Nelson Mandela was moved to a kind of house arrest in a cottage surrounded by nature in the proximity of Cape Town. He was

provided with a cook. While he remained in the model facility called Victor Verster, in the Cape Dutch town of Paarl, Mandela received members of his organization ANC and other civil society representatives. More interestingly, in July 1989, he met with the notorious president of South Africa's apartheid regime P. W. Botha, and following the release of his closest comrades on Robben Island and Pollsmoor in October, he met President F. W. de Klerk in December. After a period of two months, in February 1990, Nelson Mandela was unconditionally released.⁵

Abdullah Öcalan had legitimate reasons for pursuing such an analogy. Besides being on an island prison for 14 years, he had been seeing highest-level intelligence officials, albeit indirectly, and was able to establish contact with his lieutenants on Mt. Qandil, with whom he was pushing for negotiations under much-improved conditions of imprisonment. He was invited to dance as the partner of Turkey's strong leader, Tayyip Erdoğan.

Regardless of his sympathy for Mandela, he was keen for his exclusivity. Referring to and implying the international campaign for the release of Mandela, he told his visitors the following:

Comparing me with Mandela does not correspond fully with reality. Mandela had the accreditation of imperialism. The parallel state [the expression later used by Erdoğan to describe the Gülenists who allegedly usurped power in the state institutions; the copyright indeed belongs to Öcalan], increasingly, want to portray me as if I am accredited by imperialism. On this matter, I am irritated. I do not ask from imperialists and from the [Turkish] state to provide my freedom. I do not want to be in a position of asking a favor from them.⁶

He did not spare his passionate feelings for Mandela following his death, instructing the visiting BDP delegation to write condolences on his behalf: "Take into consideration that Mandela had formed a special committee for me. Knowing that I wished to go to Africa, to him." Öcalan alludes here to the long journey, after being forced to leave Syria, that took him to Greece, Russia, Italy, and finally to Kenya, where in 1999 he was captured by an international secret service operation believed to be masterminded by American intelligence. From Kenya, he was brought to Turkey and jailed. Öcalan continued:

He was the first person I had ever wanted to meet. He was my role model. We are following him on the road he had set. . . . Make my [condolences] message heard and my wreath visible. Mandela was faithful to us and, we are faithful to Mandela with all our hearts. Mandela was the star of Africa that illuminated its peoples. We will try to make that star also shine over the peoples of the Middle East.⁷

The similarities with South Africa did not however go beyond the legitimate parallels that could be drawn between Nelson Mandela and Abdullah Öcalan. The peace process in Turkey, despite being centered on Öcalan, did not end up in settlement of the Kurdish issue. On the contrary, it led to ferocious violence less than three years after its launch, and in the historical record, it would be registered not only as another failed Kurdish peace process, but as the final one.

MISLEADING SIGNS FOR OPTIMISM

Just as unprecedented steps were rapidly taken at the inception of the new process, unthinkable things also happened throughout its course: public endorsement of the Kurdish peace process by the prime minister in person, acknowledgment of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan as a peacemaker (until then demonized as a vicious terrorist and murderer condemned to serve life in prison), and inclusion of elected representatives of the Kurdish people in the process, thereby empowering them with a role in the peacemaking. Consequently, members of parliament from the pro-Kurdish BDP functioned as intermediaries between Öcalan and the PKK leadership on Mt. Qandil, and then between Mt. Qandil and the government officials. Traveling to Mt. Qandil and meeting with the PKK officials at their mountain redoubt, which would previously have been considered a criminal act in the context of “encouraging terrorism,” had become an essential part of peacemaking. The political commitment on the part of the government for the resolution of the decades-old conflict also looked very firm. Erdoğan went so far as to use the Turkish folk saying “to drink hemlock poison,” a metaphor to describe risking everything for a good outcome. In the first month of the new process, addressing the ruling AKP’s parliamentary caucus on February 26, 2013, he defended the contacts established between Öcalan and the pro-Kurdish delegation visiting İmralı: “We use every way available to achieve the resolution [on the Kurdish question]. If need be, we can drink hemlock, if it provides peace and welfare to the country.”⁸

The new peace process was crowned by Abdullah Öcalan’s message that was read in Turkish and Kurdish to an ecstatic crowd of over two million people in Diyarbakır on Nowruz, March 21, celebrated as the beginning of Kurdish (also Persian) New Year. Öcalan, in his message, pledged Kurdish-Turkish unity in the future, signaled an end to armed Kurdish insurgency, and instructed the Kurdish fighters to evacuate the territories of Turkey. The withdrawal had begun to be implemented by a reluctant PKK leadership on Mt. Qandil by the May of the same year. A honeymoon-like climate prevailed concerning Turkey’s Kurdish question, and hopes were high to resolve the

issue once and for all within a short period, by reaching a political settlement to the satisfaction of all involved parties.

The euphoria of those days was tempered by the rare prudent analysis warning of excessively optimistic expectations on the success of the process. So positive was the general mood, however, that such analyses had inadvertently to face the danger of being stigmatized as “anti-peace,” “pro-violence,” and so on.

SIMILAR FAILURES IN SRI LANKA AND COLOMBIA

After the peace process ended, in 2015, I would learn that the delusional atmosphere prevailing during the first months of 2013, with somewhat naïve expectations for a quick resolution of the decades-old conflict, was not exclusive to Turkey. My colleague and co-member of the Council of Experts of the Democratic Progress Institute, Ram Manikkalingam, was quoted by another member of the same body, Jonathan Powell, in his seminal book *Talking to Terrorists: How to End Armed Conflicts*. Ram Manikkalingam is an ethnic Tamil and was an adviser to Sri Lankan President Kumaratunga during the most hopeful period for the peaceful settlement of the Tamil question between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. He was quoted on the Sri Lankan experience as follows:

When President Kumaratunga was elected in 1994. . . there seemed to be a real chance of peace. . . . One of her close advisers, Ram Manikkalingam, feels in retrospect that they were filled with enthusiastic naiveté. . . . The president didn't go for direct talks but exchanged twelve letters with Prabhakaran. . . . She used to say to Manikkalingam . . . that she had received “another letter from my boyfriend.” But she never got beyond talks about talks, and the violence resumed.⁹

In Colombia, during the Caguán peace process between the government and the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), President Andrés Pastrana went, unlike the Sri Lankan case, for direct talks with insurgent leaders. Like Erdoğan who had claimed to be ready to drink hemlock if need be to achieve peace, President Pastrana is known for a statement he wrote on his conversations with the FARC political leaders: “If one has to go to the mountains to make peace, I am ready to do it.”¹⁰ The conservative Pastrana's overtures to the far-left FARC for the sake of Colombian peace were not ultimately able to bring it about. The Caguán peace process that had started in 1999 ended in failure in 2002.

FORESEEING THE FAILURE

Despite the euphoria of optimism that marked the initial stage of Turkey's Kurdish peace process, there were, albeit few, cautious but astute observations calling for prudence. One such is noteworthy:

It is unrealistic to expect a peaceful reconciliation of the armed conflict in the foreseeable future for three reasons. First, the cost of fighting remain tolerable for both sides. Hence, the conflict has not yet reached a mutually hurting stalemate that would generate strong incentives to reach a deal. . . . Second, huge differences separate what the AK Party is willing to concede to make the insurgency to lay down its arms and what insurgency demands to disarm itself. It is very unlikely that the negotiations would enable them to overcome their differences. Finally, the AK Party's strategy to seek a solution through Öcalan is unlikely to produce a breakthrough. Öcalan may call the insurgency to end its operations, but it is very uncertain if the insurgent leadership would actually follow his lead despite their rhetorical commitments to his leadership. . . . Then, what can we expect from the latest 'Kurdish initiative' in Turkey? At best, it would diminish the intensity of violence as both sides would position themselves for the local and presidential elections in 2014. . . . A decrease in violence by itself is a positive development but an overambitious initiative generating unfounded expectations may result in more bloodshed in the long run.¹¹

Such observations, and the conclusion reached, proved to be almost entirely accurate. By September 2013, the withdrawal of PKK fighters had halted on the allegation that the Turkish side was stubbornly not fulfilling its pledges. The process remained stalled, existing only in name. Nevertheless, cease-fire remained in place to enable the general elections.

In the general elections of June 7, 2015, the pro-Kurdish HDP (*Halkların Demokrasi Partisi*, Peoples' Democracy Party) that replaced the BDP, shattered the 10 percent electoral threshold that was imposed in the Constitution, primarily to prevent Kurdish political representation in Turkey's parliament. In addition to securing eighty staunchly pro-Kurdish legislators, the ruling AKP lost its majority in parliament for the first time since 2002.

THE END FOR THE PEACE PROCESS

Ten days after the election, while Turkey was preoccupied with the stunning results, a very significant development with an impact on the fate of the peace process took place, mostly unnoticed. On June 16, the armed wing

of the PKK's Syrian affiliate PYD, YPG, captured the Syrian border town Tel Abyad, which had been in the hands of the Islamic State (also known by its Arabic acronym Da'esh) for the last three years. Tel Abyad not only controlled the road to the de facto capital of the Islamic State, Raqqa, which lay an hour's drive to the south, but was also situated in the Kurdish self-rule zone adjacent to Turkey's frontier with Syria, which then continued uninterrupted for more than 200 kilometers. The geopolitical nightmare of the Turkish state was triggered. Erdoğan, whose aspirations and ambitions had been dashed by the election results, had made up his mind to consider them as null and void, and was determined to push the country for re-elections. For him, on the road to new elections, the Kurds and the already defunct peace process must be dispensed with.

On July 20, in Suruç, a Kurdish border town with pro-PKK sympathies, a suicide attack took the lives of 34 young people and left 100 wounded. They were carrying humanitarian aid across the border to the devastated town of Kobanê, the Syrian Kurdish twin of Suruç. Depicted as the "Kurds' Stalingrad," Kobanê had been recently liberated from months-long siege by the Islamic State. Two days after the Suruç bloodbath, in a nearby border town Ceylanpınar, two policemen were killed. The blame was laid on the PKK.

The violence was back, reminiscent of the ending of the Oslo process in 2011. Turkish fighter planes began to pound PKK bases in Iraqi Kurdistan, after a long interval. Erdoğan kindled nationalist passions with a successful new election campaign that brought him the desired results on November 1, the day of the re-run election. The war between the Turkish state and the Kurdish insurgency had reignited.

The most hopeful Kurdish peace process in Turkish history came to an end.

NOTES

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2. *Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement*, Crisis Group Europe Report no. 219, 11 September 2012; *Turkey: Ending the PKK Insurgency*, Crisis Group Europe Report no. 213, 20 September 2011; *Turkey and Iraqi Kurds: Conflict or Cooperation?* Crisis Group Middle East Report no. 81, November 13, 2008. Sixty-two members of the security forces, 65 PKK, and 18 civilians died in 2009. Yalçın Akdoğan (AKP deputy and Erdoğan adviser on the Kurdish question), *İnsanı yaşat ki devlet yaşasın: demokratik açılım sürecinde yaşananlar* [Improving people's lives so the state can live: Experiences in the Democratic Opening] (İstanbul, 2010), 18. The lower figure is from Prime Minister Erdoğan, cited in *The Democratic Initiative Process* (Ankara: AKP, February 2010). The higher is from Yalçın Akdoğan, op. cit., p. 15. See Crisis Group Report, *Turkey: Ending the PKK Insurgency*, op. cit., fn. 2.

3. Powell, *Talking to Terrorists*, 141.
4. Abdullah Öcalan, *Demokratik Kurtuluş ve Özgür Yaşamı İnşa (İmralı Notları)* (Neuss, Germany: Weşanen Mezopotamya, November 2015), 15.
5. Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (London: Little Brown Book Group, 1994).
6. Öcalan, *Demokratik*, 57.
7. *Ibid.*, 157.
8. Sabah Gazetesi, "Erdoğan: Gerekirse baldıran zehri içerim" (If necessary I will drink hemlock poison), February 26, 2013. <https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2013/02/26/gerekirse-baldiran-zehri-icerim>.
9. Powell, *Talking to Terrorists*, 186.
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Part III

PRIORITIZING WAR

Chapter 10

Elusive Peace, Not Talking Turkey

Tayyip Erdoğan earnestly told me that his historic Diyarbakır statement was wrong. In his August 2005 speech in Diyarbakır, the tacit politico-cultural capital of the Kurds, unlike his predecessors, Erdoğan had gone the extra mile to pronounce the two words, Kurdish question. He now retracted the statement.

“This is exactly what the Kurdish question is, Mr Prime Minister,” was my reaction. He stared at me with a puzzled expression on his face and asked what I meant. “There are very many definitions for what the Kurdish question is. The simplest of all and the one that explains the essence of it is this: Disability in naming it, inability to call it the Kurdish question.”¹

We were on board the flight from London to Ankara on October 28, 2005. The opportunity to have a conversation on the Kurdish issue was provided to me by Erdoğan’s spokesman, a friend and former colleague, on the official visit that took us from Turkey to Kuwait, Yemen, and Britain. During the long flights, the two of us, Prime Minister Erdoğan and I, would enjoy the opportunity of talking intimately on the Kurdish issue. There were things I sought to convey to him concerning the experience of the Özal period.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE KURDISH QUESTION

Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey’s prime minister between 2003 and 2014, and its first popularly elected president in August 2014 who was re-elected for five more years in June 2018, following the constitutional amendments tantamount to regime change from a parliamentary system to a *sui generis* or *a la Turca* presidential one, became the longest-serving leader in Turkish Republican history. In August 2005, in a speech in Diyarbakır, Erdoğan took



Figure 10.1 Discussing the “Kurdish Question” with Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan on Board His Private Plane, October 28, 2005. *Source:* Author’s Personal Archive.

the unprecedented step of uttering the phrase “the Kurdish question.” Before him, Süleyman Demirel (1924–2015), who served as prime minister seven times between the years 1965 and 1993 and as the ninth president of Turkey between 1993 and 2000, also spoke in Diyarbakır in December 1991, and referred to the matter as the “Kurdish reality.” At the time, such a reference being made by the veteran statesman was considered a huge breakthrough in acknowledgment of the Kurdish question at the Turkish governmental level, even though he had not pronounced the word “question” at all. One of his successors in the 1990s, Mesut Yılmaz, establishing a close relationship between Turkey’s bid for EU membership and resolution of the Kurdish question, expressed his conviction without pronouncing either of the two words, yet with a clear allusion to them, saying, “the road to Brussels passes through Diyarbakır.”

Özal was the iconoclast concerning the Kurdish question until Erdoğan entered the scene. It was incumbent upon Tayyip Erdoğan to orate the two words “Kurdish question” at a public rally in Diyarbakır on August 12, 2005. Erdoğan’s acknowledgment of the Kurdish question, and his apology for the wrongdoings of the Turkish state in the past, reverberated in the society and the political domain as never before.

His acknowledgment that went as far as calling the problem by its name had a preparatory period preceding his Diyarbakır speech. He had gathered a group of public intellectuals known for their interest in the matter and the plight of the Kurds of Turkey. The meeting itself had heralded a radical move

on the Kurdish issue by Erdoğan, and in Diyarbakır, he said, “There is no need to name each issue. Problems belong to all of us. If you insist on the name, the Kurdish question is not a question of one segment of this nation but all. Therefore, I tell all that ask ‘What will become of the Kurdish question?’ that as the prime minister of this country, it is my own problem more than anybody else’s.”²

Erdoğan after his acknowledgment went on to give what amounted to the first official apology on behalf of the Turkish state concerning the wrongdoings regarding the Kurdish question: “A great state and a strong country like Turkey has passed through the harvest of a lot of difficulties. Thus, disavowing the past mistakes can never suit great states. A great state, a strong nation is the one that marches confidently into the future reconciling with its past mistakes and sins.”

Erdoğan’s acknowledgment of the Kurdish question, coupled with what is sensed as an official apology for the historical aberration of the Turkish state vis-à-vis its Kurdish citizens for many decades, aroused high expectations in certain segments of Turkey for the ultimate settlement of the conflict that has been the most intractable problem Turkey has faced since the foundation of the Republic.

However, as the days and weeks passed after Erdoğan’s Diyarbakır performance, the issue seemed gradually be pushed into public oblivion once again.

PASSING ON ÖZAL’S LEGACY TO ERDOĞAN

From the experience that I garnered working with President Özal in the early 1990s in search of a non-military solution to the conflict, I was cognizant that the Kurdish question possesses the peculiar nature whereby violence could easily replace the quest for political settlement if there is no follow-up to awakened hopes. Özal had told me that if the opportunities that were presented in the wake of the PKK’s unilaterally declared cease-fire were not properly evaluated, not only would it collapse but the bloodshed would be back at a much higher scale than ever. That is precisely what happened. The country passed through the bloodiest episode of its recent history.

A similar situation regarding a surge in violence could occur in the aftermath of Tayyip Erdoğan’s Diyarbakır speech unless well-planned steps were taken in the direction and spirit of his acknowledgment of the Kurdish question. By that period, I had already known Erdoğan relatively closely and cooperated with him on a particularly sensitive issue of the Turkish political agenda. When it comes to a very complex topic, such as the Kurdish question, though, I believed he was a political novice, and any reluctance in following up the bold step he had taken in Diyarbakır would be perilous: it could end up

in the escalation of violence that would emanate from profound disappointment. This would not only jeopardize the hard-won and still fragile stability of Turkey, but also put an end to any hope of reaching a political settlement to the conflict for an indefinite future. Two months had passed, it was already the autumn of the year 2005, and there was no sign of the necessary follow-up to his Diyarbakır speech. Therefore, I wanted to talk to him in person to convey the lessons of the Özal period and some confidential information I thought he should be equipped with. I knew that he valued Turgut Özal more than any of his predecessors and would be receptive to what I had to say him.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who left a strong mark on Turkey's as well as the regional and international political scene during the first quarter of the twenty-first century, has been unique among Turkish statesmen in acknowledging the Kurdish question. On the other hand, no other Turkish leader has exhibited vacillations regarding the same issue to the extent that he has. In the year 2005, as I witnessed in astonishment his receding from the most encouraging step forward he had taken, I experienced my first awareness of his political zigzagging, a trait he exhibited in the following period as observed by many in and outside of Turkey.

ERDOĞAN'S TRACK RECORD OF BACKTRACKING

During the flight from London to Ankara on that day of October 28, 2005, what I encountered was not an Erdoğan reluctant to follow up on his memorable Diyarbakır statement. It was worse than that: I observed a prime minister who was repentant of his recognition of the Kurdish question. He was determined to renege. He told me that, in assessing the negative feedback since his Diyarbakır statement, he had come to the conclusion that he had committed a mistake in pronouncing those two words, Kurdish question. If he had said "something like, the social and economic problems that our citizens of Kurdish origin" face, it would have been more appropriate, he insisted.

The blunder regarding acknowledgment of the Kurdish question signifies the first milestone in Tayyip Erdoğan's record of fluctuations in engaging with the issue. A few years later, in 2009, another bold undertaking to resolve the Kurdish issue was initiated by the government, entitled "the Kurdish opening," to be replaced within a week by Prime Minister Erdoğan with "the Democratic Opening" and then a little later, again by Erdoğan, with "the National Unity and Brotherhood Project." That led me to come to the conclusion that any hope for resolution of the Kurdish question in the near future would be unrealistic.³

However, almost a year later, Erdoğan referred to the Kurdish question once again. On December 27, 2010, speaking in parliament, he said, “Our people of 73 million is one under the upper identity of the Republic of Turkey. Citizenship of the Republic of Turkey is the upper identity. Under that, there are many [different] ethnic elements. As the Prime Minister, I acknowledge the Kurdish question and will continue to do so.” Yet, it took no longer than four months for him to renege. On April 30, 2011, in an election campaign speech in the Kurdish-inhabited provincial center of Muş in eastern Turkey, he said, “There is no more Kurdish question in this country. I do not accept [that there is].” Two months later, following the breakdown of the secret talks with the PKK, on July 15, he rejected the notion once again and said, “No Kurdish question exists in this country. The question that exists is the PKK.” Rejecting the exclusivity of the Kurdish question, he mentioned that every citizen of Turkey, from Roma to those with diverse ethnic origins such as Laz and Circassians, had certain problems that he and his government were trying to resolve.

Since the year 2015 which saw the end of the most hopeful Kurdish peace process ever, Tayyip Erdoğan has consistently rejected the argument that Turkey has a Kurdish question. In June 2018, during an election campaign speech in Diyarbakır, he said he did not deny the existence of Kurdish identity but insisted that the Kurds are not discriminated against anymore because of their Kurdish identity, and they possess the same civic rights as citizens that those of Turk, Arab, Laz, Circassian, and Bosnian origins enjoy. He emphasized that as a landmark of the Turkish Republican era, the policy of denial of the Kurdish identity had ended during his government. He again reiterated that the Kurdish question does not exist.

Even in the aftermath of his humiliating defeat on June 23, 2019, in the re-run İstanbul municipal election that was mainly due to the massive Kurdish vote for the opposition candidate, Erdoğan persisted in his rejection of the existence of the Kurdish issue. He had transformed the election into a tacit plebiscite for his presidency. It ended with his huge disappointment and considered as a spell of the beginning of his era in Turkish politics. Barely a week after the İstanbul election, in July 2019, Erdoğan in a speech to his party members said he had done everything for the Kurds; thus he considers any reference to the Kurdish issue as a personal insult to himself. The denial of the existence of the Kurdish question went on.

With such a track record on the part of Tayyip Erdoğan, the failure of the peace process could be seen as inevitable. Notwithstanding, debates around what went wrong concerning the failed Kurdish peace processes usually find it difficult to explain the reasons, while asserting that Tayyip Erdoğan and the AKP are to be commended for taking bold steps for the resolution of the

issue as no predecessors had ever done or in fact dared to do. As one observer noted:

Arguably the most significant element of the AKP's liberalizing reforms was its repeated attempts to address the question of Kurdish rights. The reluctance of successive Turkish governments to address the concerns of the Kurdish population has plagued the Republic since its founding. . . . The AKP at one time saw itself as well positioned to revise that record through promoting a shared Muslim identity between Turks and Kurds.⁴

Ironically, Erdoğan can take pride in being an audacious and visionary politician regarding the Kurdish issue in reference to the “Report on the Kurdish Question” signed by him and presented to the chairman of the Welfare (Refah) Party, Necmettin Erbakan. As the chairman of the political Islamist Welfare Party's İstanbul organization, Erdoğan entrusted his four advisors, well-known Islamist figures of Kurdish and Arab origins, to prepare a report on the Kurdish question. The report that was endorsed and signed by him had twelve points with a rich substance and bold stance even when measured by post-2015 conditions. It began with three striking observations:

Report on the Kurdish Question: 18 December 1991

The question named today as “eastern” or “southeastern” question, [is] essentially the “Kurdish question.” . . . The question, in fact, is a national issue, that is to say, the Kurdish question.

The regions called the East and the Southeast were included within the geography named as Kurdistan in the oldest periods of history.

The language spoken by the Kurds is Kurdish and it is an independent language with no relation to Turkish.⁵

If Erdoğan's perceptive approach that dates back to 1991, when he was a provincial chief of an opposition party, could not yield any tangible results in a peace process that he initiated wielding executive power as the prime minister and the president of the country, no further structural reasons need be sought.

THE INSUFFICIENCY OF AKP IDEOLOGY

The essence of the failure of the two (and only) Kurdish peace processes that were undertaken during the AKP governments, with Tayyip Erdoğan as

prime minister and later the powerful President of the Republic, lies precisely in the ideological stance of the AKP. The AKP was ideologically ill-equipped to resolve the Kurdish question.

It never seemed to envision a “Kurdish opening” that went beyond “cultural rights.” The AKP leadership never abandoned the Kemalists’ focus on retaining the central government’s absolute control. In Turkey, “federalism” of any sort is often seen as the first step towards the disintegration of the Republic. This view, rooted in memories of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, resulted in a passionate rejection of any suggestion of regional autonomy. While the AKP clearly hoped to end the Kurdish conflict, it never questioned the basic Kemalist assumption of a unified centralized state. The easiest response to Kurdish concerns—greater regional autonomy and stronger local governance—remained anathema to Erdoğan and his party. Moreover, the Turkish government never fully committed to negotiations and refused to negotiate openly with the PKK. . . . Perhaps even more important, the AKP made no concerted effort to sell the peace process to a distrustful public. Having never expended political capital on the talks, the AKP was always free to walk away from the negotiating table. The AKP did walk away, repeatedly, whenever the negotiations proved electorally inconvenient.⁶

PEACE PROCESS OR A SCHEME FOR ELECTIONS

A crucial lesson derived from the experience of conflict resolution put forward by one of the principal architects of the Northern Ireland peace process, Jonathan Powell, is that “Peace processes can be frustrated when leaders become distracted by electoral goals, but equally if leaders embark on peace processes for purely electoral motives the outcome can be disastrous.”⁷

That is what happened in Turkey’s Kurdish peace process. Erdoğan’s electoral calculations in embarking on the peace process had been accurately prescribed even before the presidential elections held in August 2014:

Currently, Prime Minister Erdoğan has a vested interest in maintaining the process to hold together his political base in the face of corruption inquiries and growing international skepticism of his authoritarian tendencies. The process simultaneously neutralizes the pro-Kurdish BDP’s role as a progressive opposition part and maintains one of the last positive initiatives in the eyes of the international community. Another major motivation for Prime Minister Erdoğan is his need to secure Kurdish votes in his bid for the Turkish presidency in the elections scheduled for August 10, 2014. The balance of motivation for the AKP’s engagement with the BDP—viewed by some as the political arm of the

Kurdish nationalist movement—is open to debate, but the Turkish state has still never comprehensively engaged with the issue in a way with the sole goal of achieving a lasting peace.⁸

The potential parties to a peace process locked horns in a fierce electoral competition that dissuaded Erdoğan from conceiving of the PKK and the pro-Kurdish BDP, and its successor HDP, as his partners in implementing his political project. Erdoğan embarked on the road to bring about a presidential system vested with extraordinary powers to replace the parliamentary system of governance.

The AKP's or rather Erdoğan's share in the failure of the peace process was brought into the light by Selahattin Demirtaş, the imprisoned former leader of the HDP who made groundbreaking revelations in the courtroom during his trial in Ankara on February 13–16, 2018. After spending 460 days in a solitary cell, Demirtaş, in his first public appearance in a courtroom, made a uniquely important defense, as it shed light on how and why the recent Kurdish peace process in Turkey had failed and what Erdoğan's part in that was. The most striking part in the defense presented by Demirtaş, who had taken an active role in the initial stages of the peace process as the popular and influential chairman of the HDP, was about the feud initiated by Erdoğan against him. Accordingly, Demirtaş, who ran against Erdoğan in the presidential election in 2014, was asked to withdraw from the elections to facilitate the presidency of Erdoğan, who actually sent envoys for that purpose. He was told that Erdoğan was very irritated by his candidacy. The officials who were previously in the delegation that once conducted negotiations with the PKK on behalf of the government, told Demirtaş, "Erdoğan asks while the [Kurdish] peace process is underway, why is he running for presidency against him?" Demirtaş's response was, "We are not his [Erdoğan's] slaves. We are engaged in the [peace] process to enhance democratic politics. We are trying to decommission the PKK, but to disband the HDP is not our objective. Why is he irritated from our getting stronger within the context of democracy?" Demirtaş also revealed that he was approached by Erdoğan to refrain from participating in the June 2015 elections under the banner of the HDP, and to run as independent candidates. Another anecdote Demirtaş mentioned in his defense was that two officials—allegedly then Interior Minister Beşir Atalay and national intelligence chief Hakan Fidan—brought him a handwritten letter from Abdullah Öcalan, to force him to coordinate with Erdoğan.⁹ Demirtaş explained, however, that there was nothing in the content of Öcalan's letter suggesting that he should submit to Erdoğan.

In the initial stages of the peace process, the general public conviction was that a compromise was reached between Tayyip Erdoğan and Abdullah Öcalan, and therefore the latter would be supportive of the former's bid for

the presidency in the elections scheduled for August 2014. For many Turks who subscribe to widely circulated conspiracy theories, the *raison d'être* behind the peace process that started at full speed in the first days of 2013 was about Öcalan's commitment to Erdoğan's presidency in return for specific concessions concerning the Kurdish problem, eventually leading to his release from prison. By running against Erdoğan in the presidential election, Selahattin Demirtaş puzzled all those who had speculated on the alleged deal between Erdoğan and Öcalan. The minutes of the meetings of the Kurdish MPs with Öcalan at İmralı prison revealed the ever-present profound divergences between their respective political stands on the issue of presidential elections as well.

On April 26, 2014, a few months before the presidential elections, Öcalan disclosed his position on the upcoming vote to the three visiting MPs from the pro-Kurdish BDP.

If the [presidential] system in the United States or anything that resembles it will be brought into the debate, that can be discussed. [To introduce such a system] the bill for civil society and the bill for the autonomous local administrations should be issued. The presidential election is important. We have to be aware of our potential.

We can double it. We will have our candidate in the first round. We must spend our maximum to unite around our candidate, we will increase our votes, and we will reveal our [real] strength. [To participate in the presidential election] will provide us an important weapon and give us the chance to see our votes in the real sense for the first time. That would be a significant weapon in our hands against the Nationalists and the AKP.¹⁰

The explanation made by Öcalan to his visitors at İmralı is noteworthy in terms of revealing his position *vis-à-vis* the introduction of the presidential system to Turkey. An American type of presidential system is worth discussing and probably is acceptable. The constitutional amendments that Erdoğan pushed to enhance his presidency with extraordinary powers, following his election, have no parallel at all with the American presidential system and were not endorsed by the imprisoned Kurdish leader. His insistence on the issuance of the bills for civil society and autonomous local administration, regarding his objectives of a decentralized Turkey, had to do with Kurds enjoying self-rule at some level with the projected change.

The notion of an excessively centralized presidential rule as Erdoğan's project, and Öcalan's inclination to decentralization were incompatibly different from the very outset of the peace process. From that perspective, the interpretation that the peace process was doomed to fail by its nature would not be inaccurate.

The destructive role of the unbridgeable cleavages between the two principal actors of the peace process were observed even before the presidential election held in August 2014. A report dated a month before the election argued that the process could disintegrate if either one of the actors pulled back from the process due to ideological and personal disagreements, of which Erdoğan and Öcalan had plenty.

Öcalan used the word *Ulusalçılar* instead of *Milliyetçiler* referring to the secular nationalists. They are almost synonymous, but in current Turkish political lexicon, *Ulusalçılar*, a newer connotation of Nationalists is used to refer to Kemalist or quasi-leftist nationalists, while *Milliyetçiler* is used to imply the traditional, right-wing nationalists. *Ulusalçılar* are mostly rooted in the bureaucracy and military. Öcalan's emphasis on an independent Kurdish candidate illustrates his perception on the two different poles of Turkish political spectrum: He sees the old secularist ruling elite and the conservative, quasi-Islamist AKP on equal footing concerning the Kurdish struggle. It is important to dispel any notion of a deal that had been reached between him and Erdoğan for launching the peace process.

Besides,

Prime Minister Erdoğan and Öcalan obviously do not have a history of partnership, and the 2014 elections—the nationwide local elections last March and the presidential election this August—have introduced an unpredictable element to the negotiations. Indeed, opposition politicians and some outside experts speculate that Prime Minister Erdoğan and the PKK are pursuing the peace talks for political advantage and that motivation to continue through a difficult process will wane after the elections in August, when the prime minister will no longer need to reach out for Kurdish votes. Of course, there is a fundamental power imbalance against Öcalan who is imprisoned and remains at the mercy of Prime Minister Erdoğan's government. Likewise, the two men are not sitting down directly with each other, and—with all negotiations passing through interlocutors—the risk of misunderstanding is high.¹¹

After August 2014, Erdoğan not only came to the conclusion that he no longer needed to reach out for Kurdish votes, he also began to see the Kurdish votes supporting the pro-Kurdish party's candidates endorsed by Abdullah Öcalan—as in the case of Selahattin Demirtaş running against him—as a formidable obstacle to his objectives. In Demirtaş's fiery speech on March 17, 2015, on the eve of Nowruz and at the heat of the campaign for general elections, he repeated three times, as if taking an oath: "As long as the HDP exists on this land and its members breathe life, Mr Erdoğan, we will not let you be The Leader!" That passionate statement by Selahattin Demirtaş, the only

Kurdish political figure who also had earned the sympathy and confidence of large segments of the non-Kurdish majority of society, was imprinted in the public memory.

In one of the most perceptive and comprehensive assessments written on post-2014 and post-2015 Turkey, published in *London Review of Books*, the rise of Selahattin Demirtaş and the success of the pro-Kurdish HDP in the general elections along with the developments in Syria were underlined as the main reasons for Erdoğan ending the peace process:

The emergence of Demirtaş as a significant figure may have played a role in ending the AKP's support for the Kurdish "solution process." . . . The peace process soon unravelled as a result of two major developments. First, the Syrian civil war gave Syrian Kurds the opportunity to form a de facto autonomous region, known as Rojava. Turkey had initially adopted a strong anti-Assad line, and allowed its border with Syria to be used as a conduit for supplies and funds to Syrian opposition forces, as well as a route for Syrian refugees fleeing the conflict. But the existence of a Kurdish-controlled territory, within a few miles of its southeastern towns and cities, unnerved both the AKP and the Turkish army, which was wary of international support for PKK-affiliated Syrian Kurdish militias just across the porous border, and of their military prowess. . . . Perhaps the more important development from Erdoğan's perspective, however, was the rising popularity of the HDP both in the southeast and nationally. He won the presidency in 2014 easily enough, but the party was not polling at its usual levels in the lead-up to the June 2015 parliamentary elections. In the spring of 2015 Erdoğan complained that the AKP was bearing the burden of the peace process while the HDP was reaping its rewards. . . . Demirtaş campaigned against Erdoğan's plans for a new presidential system of government. . . . As the HDP gained ground, Erdoğan broke off talks with Öcalan in April 2015 and began courting Turkish nationalists. Öcalan was returned to solitary confinement and visitors were again forbidden to visit him. The election realised Erdoğan's worst fears, with the AKP's vote share falling by 9 per cent to just over 40 per cent. The HDP won 80 seats in parliament, with more than 13 per cent of the vote, becoming the first pro-Kurdish party to exceed the electoral threshold. The combination of the AKP's weaker showing and a fourth party taking seats in parliament meant Erdoğan no longer had an absolute majority, leaving the AKP unable to form a single-party government for the first time in more than a decade. Worse still, the HDP had denied Erdoğan a clear majority for the proposed constitutional amendments necessary to create a presidential system.

Erdoğan responded to this setback with the most ruthless gamble of his career. He began a new military campaign against the Kurdish rebels and pursued an alliance with the right-wing nationalist MHP.¹²

The peace process ended in 2015. While there had been a token peace process since early 2013, in reality, by 2015, it was a dead man walking. Its principal parties were in fierce competition with each other, each having uncompromising political aims.

WHY RELEASE THE BIRD IN THE CAGE?

From my own experience, I also was aware of the fact that the problems inherent in the structure and the nature of the peace process were so far beyond the control of the two men that they were not even meeting directly. Thus, the risk of misunderstandings was high since all the negotiations were passing through interlocutors.

During those hopeful days in 2010 and 2011 while the peace process was ongoing in Oslo, I was entrusted by a respected think-tank to prepare a report on how the PKK's decommissioning would be possible. The think-tank Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) was cooperating with Tayyip Erdoğan in many specific issues. Erdoğan even assigned TESEV to work on democratization processes in the greater Middle East and North Africa. According to the resolutions of the G-8 summit in Georgia, United States, in June 2004, Turkey, Yemen, and Italy would co-sponsor the Democracy Assistance Dialogue to bring together democracy foundations, civil society groups, and governments from the G-8, the region, and other countries to promote and strengthen democratic institutions, initiate new democracy programs, and so on. That was in line with President George W. Bush's announcement in November 2003 of the "forward strategy of freedom" to advance freedom and democracy in the greater Middle East. Erdoğan's confidence in TESEV was so great that he delegated to its auspices the mission the 2004 G-8 summit had given Turkey. I unintentionally damaged that trust.

The main objective of my report, which actually was the most comprehensive written material to date on the specific matter of the PKK's decommissioning, was to assist the government in how to proceed with reconciliation with the PKK. In the report, certain observations that I put forward caused Erdoğan's anger:

Almost all the interviewees contacted for the report agree that Abdullah Öcalan is an important political actor who can assume the role of the 'partner' of a solution and who should therefore be utilized for a solution. Hence, a new arrangement to Abdullah Öcalan's imprisonment conditions appears inevitable in terms of solving the matter and ensuring 'departure from the mountain.' A new arrangement in imprisonment conditions can range from improvement of

conditions in the short term to the release of Öcalan in the medium term. The short-term arrangement on which various interviewees agree was a transition to house arrest. The concept of house arrest is evaluated as a facility that will put Öcalan in a position where he can meet people other than the “state committee” and communicate with his organization in a way that will contribute more effectively to a solution. . . . During our interviews, it was surprising that the most radical suggestion regarding Öcalan’s status came from an individual known for his opposition to Öcalan among the Kurds of Turkey. This Kurdish individual, when asked “how the state can dissolve the PKK,” gave a categorical reply, saying, “You have to release their Leader. You cannot dissolve the PKK as long as their Leader remains there,” and thus emphasized the necessity to release Öcalan.¹³

The report was published in the Turkish language in June 2011, and presented at a public event in which three MPs participated as discussants belonging to the three main parties represented in the parliament. The event drew considerable media attention. Months later, TESEV’s chairman conveyed to me the information that in reading the report, Prime Minister Erdoğan became very angry with me. In a conversation with TESEV’s chairman, Erdoğan told him, “The bird is in the cage and I am holding the cage. Why would I release the bird!” and added: “Cengiz Çandar put harmful thoughts into the minds of people, by advocating the ultimate release of Abdullah Öcalan from prison.”

It was apparent that Erdoğan was never willing to remove the fundamental power imbalance that favored him against Öcalan, who is imprisoned and remains at his mercy, for the sake of reaching an ultimate political settlement of the Kurdish issue. He wanted to maintain the power imbalance and keep Öcalan as he has been for a long time. For him, this was indispensable leverage and would remain so.

Erdoğan was intransigent regarding Öcalan and an amnesty for the PKK cadres to reach a settlement, and this was partially due to his lack of understanding on the true nature of the issue. A conversation between the prominent Turkish journalist and intellectual figure Hasan Cemal and Jalal Talabani only days before the stroke in December 2012 that incapacitated the Iraqi president to carry out his functions, illustrates this vividly. Talabani conveyed the following information to Cemal:

Last year [2011], I met with Tayyip Erdoğan during the UN General Assembly [in New York]. I told him that “the PKK talked to me and said, they are ready to disarm.” [At this point, Cemal reported, Talabani leaned toward him and said, “I’m talking about disarmament, not ceasefire.”] It [the PKK] had two conditions for that: general amnesty and amending the definition of citizenship in the Constitution. The word Turk as a prerequisite for citizenship has to be

deleted. . . . Erdoğan responded saying that the general amnesty is not easy to declare, because the public opinion is not ready for it. He explained himself as not a nationalist, but a Muslim and said, “Everybody is my brother.” On his response, I told him that he could follow Prophet Muhammed’s example. I reminded him that Prophet Muhammed upon his conquest of Mecca, pardoned everyone and released all the prisoners. I asked Erdoğan that without a general amnesty, where would all the PKK cadres go upon leaving the mountain? Would they disarm and leave the mountain to go to jail? I told him that public opinion’s alleged contempt could not be a pretext not to declare a general amnesty.¹⁴

There is an amusing addendum to Hasan Cemal’s anecdote that was relayed to me by my good friend Kamran Karadaghi, president of Iraq’s chief of staff, with whom I had closely collaborated in establishing the Özal-Talabani link in 1991. Kamran was present at the meeting with Erdoğan. He disclosed: “After Mam Jalal reminded Tayyip Erdoğan about Prophet Muhammad’s amnesty for the Meccans, to impress the devout Muslim Turkish prime minister for the PKK case, a totally unaffected Erdoğan brusquely responded: ‘I am not Prophet Muhammad!’”

NO THIRD PARTY, NO COMPROMISE

International practice concerning conflict resolution illustrates the importance of mediation to overcome misunderstandings and bridge the ostensibly unbridgeable gap between the sides. The absence of a third party in Turkey’s latest and failed peace process (2013–2015) was one of its major flaws. The following generalization in Jonathan Powell’s magnum opus is valid for Turkey’s case as well:

Governments . . . usually try to eliminate the armed group first rather than negotiate. Having exhausted all the alternatives, they turn finally to the idea of talking, but in doing so, they face major obstacles, particularly public opinion. They usually try to start with secret and deniable talks [For Turkey’s Kurdish peace process, that was the stage of the Oslo secret talks in 2008 to 2011.] It is entirely understandable that they would want to keep outsiders out. . . . however. . . without a third party it can be far harder to reach an agreement.¹⁵

A third-party involvement in Turkey’s Kurdish peace processes had been experienced before and during the Oslo talks, which lasted five years altogether. The failure of the process had nothing to do with the third party, be it Norway or the HD Centre in Geneva. On the contrary, the fact that there had been a peace process at all was the result of the involvement of the third party. Therefore, although the Turkish government has not been especially eager

about the presence of a third party previously, it was not alien or exclusively allergic to the idea of a third party in the peace process. The absence of such a party in the process between 2013 and 2015 should instead be seen in the light of Erdoğan's reluctance toward committing himself to a comprehensive political settlement to be reached with the PKK, which had always been eager for the involvement of a third party.

DISENGAGEMENT FROM PEACE PROCESS: REJECTING AMERICAN MEDIATION

After 2015 and especially in the wake of the botched military coup in July 2016, Erdoğan was completely disinterested in the resumption of any peace process, still less the notion of a third party. During Erdoğan's controversial visit to Washington DC in March 2016, the head of the Turkish Intelligence and the undersecretary of foreign ministry who were accompanying him met with high American officials who told them that the United States would act as a mediator and was interested in reviving the Kurdish peace process in Turkey. To the resentment of Turkey, the United States was in alliance with the PKK-affiliate PYD and its armed wing YPG in northern Syria to capture the city of Raqqa, considered as the capital of the Islamic State, which goes under the acronyms ISIS and ISIL. The source who supplied the never-publicized information above was a high-level American official who was present at the meeting and wanted to remain anonymous. He added that as a sweetener for the proposal, generous military assistance would be made available. However, the American proposal angered the two Turkish officials. They rejected the offer and left the meeting abruptly.

At the time, for the Americans who were leading an international coalition, fighting against ISIS in northern Syria was the priority. The Syrian Kurds affiliated with the PKK were their best allies on the ground. From the Turkish vantage point, its NATO ally the United States was allied with elements that it named as terrorists and that—it vehemently tried to convince the international system—constituted an existential threat to Turkey.

With the collapse of the peace process in July 2015, not only were hostilities reignited but northern Syria was chosen as the new battlefield in Turkey's war with the Kurds.

Even if there had been no other reasons for the failure of Turkey's Kurdish peace process, the clash of interests between Turkey and the PKK, and the red lines drawn by both sides against each other on the Syrian front alone, would have been enough to derail it. Syria, therefore, bears the lion's share of responsibility for the collapse of Turkey's Kurdish peace process.

Turkey's war against the Kurds extended to Syria, turning the country into a battlefield between Turkey and the Kurds.

NOTES

1. Cengiz Çandar, *Mezopotamya Ekspresi, Bir Tarih Yolculuğu* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2012), 30.
2. It should be noted that in the Turkish language the word “*sorun*” is used as the equivalent of both “question” and “problem.” The translation of Erdoğan’s usage of the same word is made according to its connotation.
3. Çandar, *Mezopotamya*, 32.
4. Howard Eissenstat, *Erdoğan as Autocrat: A Very Turkish Tragedy* (POMED Report, Project on Middle East Democracy, April 2017).
5. Ömer Vehbi Hatipoğlu, *İslamcıların Kürt Sorunu Algısı* [Islamist perception of the Kurdish question] (İstanbul: Elips Kitap, December 2015), 224–25.
6. Eissenstat, *Erdoğan as Autocrat*.
7. Powell, *Talking to Terrorists*, 127.
8. Michael Werz and Max Hoffman, *The United States, Turkey and the Kurdish Regions: The Peace Process in Context* (Washington” Center for American Progress, July 2014), 14–15.
9. The full text of Selahattin Demirtaş’s defense was provided to the author by the Press Office of the HDP (translation from Turkish to English is done by the author).
10. Öcalan, *Demokratik Kurtuluş ve Özgür Yaşamı İnşa (İmralı Notları)*, 284.
11. Werz and Hoffman, *The United States*, 17–18.
12. Ella George, “Erdoğan’s ‘New’ Turkey: Purges and Paranoia,” *London Review of Books* 40, no. 10 (24 May 2018), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v40/n10/ella-george/purges-and-paranoia>.
13. Çandar, *Leaving the Mountain: How May the PKK Lay Down Arms? Freeing the Kurdish Question from Violence* (İstanbul: Tesev Publications, March 2012), 97–98. (Translated by the author himself from the Turkish original “*Dağdan İniş*”: *PKK Nasıl Silah Bırakır?*)
14. Hasan Cemal, *Çözüm Sürecinde Kürdistan Günlükleri* [Kurdistan chronicles during the resolution process] (İstanbul: Everest, 2014), 22.
15. Powell, *Talking to Terrorists*, 134–41.

Chapter 11

Battlefield Syria

TALKING SYRIA WITH ERDOĞAN

All of a sudden the expression on the face of Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan became stern. I could notice the convulsion. Pausing for a couple of seconds, he assumed an overbearing tone and a firm manner. “Put away your pens, notebooks, and tape recorders. Put them away, so that I can talk comfortably. Whatever I will say will remain here,” he said to the two people sitting next to me, who were taking notes.

It was the early moments of March 30, 2011, some minutes after midnight to be precise. We were on board his private plane, flying back to Ankara from Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq, where he was the first Turkish Prime Minister to pay an official visit.

That had been a very long day. Early in the morning, all of us were in Baghdad, the very center of Iraq. The day had started with Erdoğan paying visits to one of the holiest places for Shiites in Kazimiyya, then crossing the bridge over the Tigris to the nearby Sunni neighborhood of Adhamiyya, to the mosque where Imam Abu Hanifa, the founder of the religious school to which most of the Turks of the Sunni sect (including Erdoğan) also belonged. In his previous visits to Baghdad, on which I had also accompanied him, Erdogan had not seen anything more than the road from the airport to Baghdad’s Green Zone, where the government offices were located. The landscape was dotted with high cement walls erected for security reasons. The measures taken had turned a wide area of Iraq’s capital into labyrinthine alleys. I recall we were on the way back to Turkey from one of those visits, when a disgruntled Erdoğan had told me that he had been in Baghdad a full day and was going back without having seen it. On the morning of March 29,

2011, he finally had seen what Baghdad looked like, when his motorcade had driven to the airport for the flight south to Najaf. In Najaf, he visited Imam Ali's Shrine and had an audience with the Grand Ayatollah Sistani, the highest Shia authority in Iraq, known for his different theological interpretation of basic tenets of Shiism than those ruling Iran. In the evening of the same day, Erdoğan and his entourage landed in the north, at the Erbil International Airport that had been constructed by a Turkish firm and that was going to be inaugurated by the Turkish Prime Minister and the President of the KRG, Masoud Barzani. Every single moment spent by Erdoğan in the capital city of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq was considered historic and was televised live by all the Turkish and Kurdish channels. Dinner was in Kurdish Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani's residence and followed the talks between the two sides. After the dinner, Erdoğan and Barzani along with officials of both sides mingled and relaxed in the living room, singing Turkish folk songs played on a Turkish-Kurdish instrument by İbrahim Kalın, who would later become the presidential spokesperson.

During the flight back to Ankara, Erdoğan wanted to talk about his impressions of the two-day visit to Iraq, and I interrupted him, changed the subject to Syria. The Arab Uprisings that had removed the autocratic regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, shaken Libya from its foundations, and spread to Yemen, were seemingly knocking on Syria's door. Turmoil in Syria was only two weeks old. Turbulence had begun in Dera, Syria's southern border town with Jordan, and also in its capital Damascus. For me, Erdoğan's prognosis on Syria was much more important than listening to his impressions about Iraq. I told him the following:

If the developing events in Syria cannot be averted and if they expand all over the country, they will be very troubling for Turkey and simultaneously for you. Syria has been the launching pad of Turkey's new Middle East policy. You have an affinity to [President] Bashar Assad. At the same time, you are the darling of the Arab street. You describe yourself as the voice of the voiceless. Nowadays, your merit of being the voice of the voiceless has transcended Turkey's frontiers. That Arab street, now, is on the street indeed. They turn and look at you, trying to find their voice in you.

That was the point when Erdoğan's face convulsed, understanding the question my words would lead to, and he asked his audience to keep his response off the record. He said:

It is not only a personal rapport with Bashar, but our wives also are close to each other. We have devotion between our two families. However, three years ago, "Look Bashar!" I told him, "I like you, and I know that you like me, too. I

am also aware that your people also like you. But if you do not initiate reforms, you will lose the people. Move in that direction. I am telling him this every time I meet him for three years. It is true that I have excellent personal relations with him but at the same time, I am the Prime Minister of Turkey. If Turkey's interests contradict my friendship with Bashar, I act according to the former. I side with the people of Syria. Syria [is significant for us] as it is tantamount to Aleppo. Aleppo echoes Hatay [province of Turkey to the west of Aleppo, annexed in 1939, and which Syria still officially regards as its own.] Moreover, Syria is also Qamishli. There is no need to explain what Qamishli is."

I had not expected that response. I asked Erdoğan to elaborate. "That is to say," he continued, "we cannot allow a similar refugee flow as we experienced with the refugees coming from northern Iraq in 1991. We cannot establish our lines of defense within our territory." He cut it there.¹

What was apparent in what he said was that the Turkish policy-making had strategic considerations for how Syria's future was shaping up. For the Turks, it had a Kurdish magnitude more than anything else. Erdoğan's wording "Syria is also Qamishli, there is no need to explain what Qamishli is" in connection with preventing possible waves of refugees crossing the border into Turkey, as had happened in 1991 with hundreds of thousands of Kurdish refugees, was extremely salient. Qamishli was not only the largest city in northeast Syria, it also was predominantly inhabited by Kurds, lying across from Turkey's Nusaybin, one of the main hotbeds of pro-PKK militancy in the region.

SER XAT, BIN XAT

For hundreds of thousands of Kurds, if not millions, on either side of Turkish-Syrian border, the line that separated them was non-existent indeed. The Treaty of Ankara in 1921 designated the Turkish-Syrian border. At that time, Syria was under French mandate, and the other signatory was the Turkish nationalist government of Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) in Ankara. The Berlin-Baghdad railway, for which construction began in 1903, marked the border for 400 kilometers. Towns are paired along the line, from the Syrian Al-Rai and the Turkish Çobanbey in the west, to the Syrian Qamishli and the Turkish Nusaybin in the east. The rail line itself forms the border that, in many areas it crosses, has divided Kurdish households. The Kurds on both sides of the rail line marking the Turkey-Syria border never psychologically reconciled themselves to separation; for the Syrian Kurds, Turkey was simply *ser xat* or "above the line," while for Turkish Kurds, Syria was *bin xat*, "below the line." Naming the neighboring countries as Turkey and Syria did not occur

to Kurds. The foundations for the intertwined destinies of Turkish and Syrian Kurds in the aftermath of 2011 were laid ninety years ago.

In retrospect, the value of my conversation with Tayyip Erdoğan was that, although it was kept off the record, it became my first source of reference for how Turkey saw and might react to the developments in Syria if the spasms encompassing the Middle East and North Africa should cause turmoil there.

As if to confirm the fear expressed by Erdoğan on that occasion, shortly after our conversation Syria turned into a battlefield on which global and regional proxy wars were waged. It has become a fragmented country where unspeakable human tragedies are lived through, with hundreds of thousands of people losing their lives, and half of its population leaving the country or being internally displaced, in the process rocking the entire international system and balance of power. Turkey has become the recipient of the largest number of refugees with over three million, far beyond what Erdoğan could predict. However among them there were almost no Kurds and Turkey did not, as Erdoğan had emphasized in our conversation, establish its lines of defense within its own territory. Instead, it moved into Syria to export its war with the Kurds beyond Turkish borders.

IN DAMASCUS

Almost a week later I found myself in Damascus, at the Presidential Palace, and was even introduced to President Bashar al-Assad by the Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu when the Syrian president escorted his guest out. Davutoğlu had asked me to join him in a day-long visit to Bahrain. On the way there he had decided he would also pay a quick visit to Damascus. Typical of him, from Bahrain he (and therefore all those accompanying him, including me) had flown to Qatar to resolve an issue related to the ongoing conflict in Libya—and from there, without much sleep, we had rushed to the capital of Syria. Davutoğlu had a three-hour tête-a-tête meeting with Assad. Following the meeting, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem and Assad's confidant and adviser Buthaina Shaaban had invited the Turkish minister and the accompanying small delegation to a restaurant in the old Damascus. Davutoğlu and also Turkish spymaster Hakan Fidan would visit Damascus successively as Tayyip Erdoğan's envoys during the summer of 2011, before relations between the two countries broke off and Turkey became both host and organizer of the Syrian opposition aiming to topple the regime in Damascus. Davutoğlu's visit during the first week of April 2011 was the first Turkish diplomatic attempt to resolve the mounting crisis, at that point already one month old. During our night flight back to Turkey on April 6, Davutoğlu summarized for me the three-hour conversation during which

he preached to the Syrian president on the need to institute reform in Syria. What sounded interesting to me in Davutoğlu's self-indulgent narrative was his proposal for expanding the political base of the Syrian government. He proposed to Bashar Assad to reshuffle his government so as to create positions for three ministers from the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood. He went so far as to affirm he could provide five names from which Bashar Assad could pick and appoint as he found appropriate.²

MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD OF TURKEY?

Three years later, in June 2014, at the Oslo Forum, an annual gathering of international human rights activists where this year former US president Jimmy Carter and United Nations secretary-general Kofi Annan were keynote speakers, I would listen to Buthaina Shaaban speaking in one of the panels as she castigated Turkey for the bloodshed in Syria. In the sidelines of the meeting, when I told her that her arguments were far from convincing on Turkey's role in the Syrian debacle, she retorted with the allegation of Turkish support for the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. I reminded her of our lunch in Damascus with Davutoğlu, and revealed I was privy to the information regarding the Turkish Foreign Minister's proposals to Bashar Assad concerning inclusion of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Syrian government. She then stunned me with the remark that in fact it was not the first time such a proposal had been made: before there were any troubles in Syria and Turkish-Syrian relations were warm, the same proposition had been made by Tayyip Erdoğan to Bashar Assad in Aleppo, in a meeting at which Shaaban was also present.

At the first stage of the Syrian conflict, there was nothing to suggest that Turkey was prioritizing the Kurdish dimension with a geopolitical outlook. Beginning in autumn 2011, Turkey was intensely preoccupied with hosting the Syrian opposition. The Syrian National Council (SNC) was in fact based in İstanbul; the Muslim Brotherhood preferred a low-profile role and because of its more secular nature Turkey became the seat for the SNC. The Syrian Kurdish parties and political groups close to the Iraqi Kurdish parties united in what they called the Kurdish National Council; the acronym in Kurdish is ENKS. (The PKK's Syrian offshoot PYD, founded in 2003, never took part in the ENKS.) Although irritated with the emergence and presence of the ENKS, Turkey's posture vis-à-vis that Kurdish grouping was initially not hostile. It expended unsuccessful efforts to incorporate the ENKS into the SNC, and sought to influence it through the authorities of the KRG and Barzani's Iraqi Kurdistan Democrat Party, with which Turkey enjoyed good and close relations. In 2011 and even in 2012, Turkish leaders firmly believed that the days of the regime in Damascus were numbered, therefore Turkey's

focus regarding the Syrian conflict was primarily to strengthen the SNC and prepare it to replace Bashar Assad who would be removed from power. In 2011 and 2012, Turkey leaned toward Damascus, not particularly concerned with any Kurdish threat contiguous with its southern borders.

ON SYRIA WITH BARZANI AND TALABANI

Iraqi Kurds, although relatively low-profile at that time, were paying attention to the developments in northern Syria, their Western neighbor, as much as Turkey was. In May 2011, I was in Erbil and met with KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani and Dr. Fouad Hussein, chief of staff to President Masoud Barzani, to put the final touches on the report on PKK decommissioning that I was preparing. When I was about to leave for the airport, Nechirvan told me that President Jalal Talabani was about to arrive from Baghdad for a meeting with Masoud Barzani, and it would be nice if I waited and greeted him. That was a pleasant surprise. Minutes later, the President of Iraq and the President of the KRG arrived together at the lush guesthouse of the KDP. The guesthouse had a splendid view from the hilltop overlooking the city of Erbil twenty kilometers below, to the plain carrying its name and stretching endlessly to the south toward Kirkuk and to the west toward Mosul. I was invited to have tea with both men before leaving for the airport.



Figure 11.1 Author with the First President of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, a Historical Leader of the Iraqi Kurds, Masoud Barzani, in the KDP Guesthouse in Massif, North of Erbil. July 2003. The war in Syria would be discussed in the same room in 2011. *Source:* Author's Personal Archive.

Not wasting any time, the issue of Syria was brought into discussion. I conveyed them my Damascus impressions from one month earlier. They listened attentively and posed some questions. Then, they expressed their opinions. It was a unique moment for me to share views with two historical Iraqi Kurdish personalities about the most pressing political subject of the time. Barzani's view was that the Syrian Kurds should not step forward and participate in the anti-regime demonstrations spreading all over Syria until such time as the downfall of the regime was certain. Any immature Kurdish involvement would transform the Syrian conflict into an Arab-Kurdish one that the Kurds had no interest in it. One day before, I had heard a similar analysis from Dr. Fouad Hussein who was present in the room. Thanks to Barzani's assessment I became privy to the KRG's unpublicized position regarding the Syrian conflict.

Jalal Talabani, who had spent years in exile in Damascus, knew Syria better than any of us in that room. "The Syrian regime is a minority regime, but from another aspect it is a coalition of all the minorities that are wary of a Sunni-Islamist rule," he said, commencing his analysis of the situation. "Therefore, there is nothing that it would not commit to survive. It will use force brutally. But, except the Alawites, it could also ally with the Christians, Druze, and the Ismailis. It can neutralize the Kurds. Such mass support should not be underestimated. It will prove much more resilient than predicted. Syria, more and more, will drift into a civil war."

The future proved his insight. He was accurate to a large extent. In May 2011, what even the most knowledgeable and experienced Kurdish leaders could not foresee was the role to be played by the Syrian Kurds affiliated to the PKK. That connection was what, in a manner of speaking, sucked Turkey into the Syrian imbroglio.

KURDISH QUESTION INTERTWINED

Consequently, it had an inevitable bearing upon the peace process in Turkey. A report prepared for the Center for American Progress, known to be close to President Barrack Obama, examined this context:

The peace process in Turkey cannot be seen in isolation from the regional dynamics that affect it, particularly the increasing leverage of Kurdish groups in Syria and Iraq. The partitioning of the Ottoman Empire was completed by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne that split the region's Kurdish population among four sovereign states—Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran—administered by central governments based in distant cities. . . . The central governments of Syria, Iraq, and Iran are also monitoring the Turkish peace process closely and have stakes

in its success or failure. . . . These regional dynamics will affect the ultimate success or failure of the peace process.³

The intertwined nature of the Kurdish problem in Turkey and Syria was also emphasized by the leading political and military personality of the Syrian Kurds, Mazloum Abdi. He said:

The Kurdish problem in Turkey and Syria are intertwined. The Kurds in Iraq are also part of this equation. We cannot separate them. Whenever a step toward peace is taken in Turkey its positive effects are felt here in Rojava. Likewise, any positive gesture by Turkey toward Syria's Kurds has a positive impact on the Kurds in Turkey. By the same token hostile moves by Turkey have a negative impact on both sides of the border.⁴

Such was indeed the case. The turning point was on July 19, 2012, when the Syrian regime withdrew from the Kurdish-inhabited regions in the north on the frontier with Turkey. The withdrawal followed the big explosion that took place in Damascus one day before and killed military and security officials at the highest level including the minister of defense and President Bashar's brother-in-law. Assad, who was preoccupied with the fight in the countryside of Hama, Homs, Deraa, and Damascus, did not want to open up a new military front in the north of the country. Besides, there could not be a more damaging tactical move to defeat the Syrian policy of Ankara than relinquishing the northern strip of Syria to a movement related to the PKK.

The Syrian army began to withdraw from the northern Kurdish regions right after the attack that hit Damascus at its heart. The PYD that had become an organized force with its political and military cadres filled the power vacuum. First, on 19 July 2012 Kurds took control in Kobanê (Ayn al-Arab). Then the same happened for Afrin on 20 July, and on 21 July for Derik (Malikiye), and Amude followed them. . . . Then, Qamishli, considered as the capital of Western Kurdistan, Haseke and in March 2013 Rumeilan, the oil-rich region of Syria followed suit.⁵

On July 19, the foundation of the YPG (*Yêkîneyên Parastina Gel*, People's Protection Units) was announced. YPG and its counterpart for women, YPJ, emerged as the armed forces of the Syrian Kurds that found political representative in the PYD and the administratively in TEV-DEM (*Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk*, The Democratic Society). The former evolved into the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) on October 2015 and the latter on March 17, 2016, to the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, incorporating Arabs, Christians of different denominations, and some Turkmens, the people that comprise the indigenous population of northern Syria.

REVOLUTION FOR PKK, NIGHTMARE FOR TURKEY

The PKK hailed the development in July 2012 as the “Rojava Revolution”; in contrast to the Kurdish achievements in northern Iraq that were attributed to two Kurdish organizations, the KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the Kurdish performance in northern Syria was almost fully under the control of the PYD, which is the PKK’s ideological kin and follows the political line and principles espoused by Abdullah Öcalan. Rojava in Kurdish simply means “west” and thus connotes “Western Kurdistan” in the PKK lexicon.

What the PKK saw as a revolution was nothing but a nightmare for Turkey.

With the consolidation of political control in northern Syria under the PYD, conditions have emerged that point to the creation of a viable transborder Kurdish nationalist movement, which would be the first of its kind since World War I. Indeed, the flow of PKK fighters across the border to join the PYD’s fight in Syria can be seen, in part as evidence of a consolidation of Kurdish self-perception.⁶

As can be said for many of the developments in Syria, Turkey’s Kurdish issue had been intertwined with that of its neighbor.

When Turkey realized that the Syrian regime was no longer in complete control of its Kurds . . . rising Kurdish fortunes in the form of autonomy in Syria began to be seen by Turkey as a serious threat to its national unity. The bottom line was that for a lasting peace with its Kurds, Turkey wanted to ensure that the Kurds in Syria were not making progress in a direction which it perceived would eventually become problematic for its internal security. Furthermore, Turkey did not want another autonomous Kurdish state similar to the one that exists in the post-Saddam Iraq.⁷

Hence, Turkey was in the process of addressing its Kurdish question by looking for some form of long-term agreement with the PKK, but the development of Kurdish autonomy in Syria and the possibility of Kurdish unification in the Middle East have made the peace talks with the PKK no longer viable for Turkish policymakers. The rise of Kurdish autonomy alongside the Turkish border has left Turkey without a concrete policy regarding its Kurdish question, pushing it back to its traditional approach of solving the problem by war.⁸

The explicit connection between Turkey’s and Syria’s Kurdish issues and the aspirations of Turkey’s Kurds that shaped Ankara’s drive vis-à-vis Syria was observed in the aftermath of Turkish military incursion in October 2019:

As long as the Kurdish-led project gains traction in Syria, the Turkish government knows it will fail at keeping Kurdish autonomy aspirations in its

southeastern Kurdish-majority region under control. The leaders in Ankara know that no matter how many Kurdish politicians they imprison, as long as the Rojava experiment lives on, the Kurds in Turkey may still believe it is possible to one day carve out an autonomous space for themselves.⁹

CROSSING RED LINES

The initial success regarding autonomous governance and power consolidation in Rojava coincided with the initial period of the peace process that was launched in Turkey. During the summer of 2013, Öcalan sounded hopeful in reaching an understanding with the Turkish government concerning Rojava. In one of his talks with his visitors at İmralı prison, while seemed sticking to the idea of Kurdish self-rule, he put forward some proposals and elaborated on his northern Syria project:

I want to make a small proposal for Rojava. They [the YPG and al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, the Salafi-jihadist Nusra Front] can have a ceasefire. But Nusra cannot be allowed to settle in Serêkani (Ras al-Ayn). That is a Kurdish region. Autonomy is filling the vacuum. The Syrian state has abandoned and gone. There is a vacuum. What do you expect them [the Kurds] to do? Being open themselves to massacres and starvation? What? Why are they [the Salafi groups allegedly with Turkish logistical support] attacking [the Kurds in Serêkani] like bulls to the red cloth? PYD is ready to negotiate. They are not engaged in any hostility [with Turkey]. You [as Turkish government] can establish relations with the PYD in a more principled way than the one you have with Barzani [in northern Iraq. . . . That is the way to force the both sides to a resolution. Such a policy is also in the interest of Turkey. The resolution in Turkey means the one in Syria, and the one in Syria is the one in Turkey.¹⁰

Öcalan, apparently aware of the intertwined nature of the peace process in Turkey with the developments in northern Syria, was trying the salvage the former from its fateful collapse.

A few months later, the following dialogue with Sırrı Süreyya Önder, an MP from the pro-Kurdish BDP who was one of those carrying messages between the government, the PKK headquarters on Mt. Qandil, and İmralı prison, illustrated how it was inherently impossible to reconcile the divergent views and interests between Erdoğan and Öcalan:

S.S.Önder: Prime Minister [Erdoğan] continued and said, “You are asking me what I am going to do. Let me tell you, I will do everything that is to be

done when the time comes, and on this, I have reached an agreement with Apo [Abdullah Öcalan]. I have only one red line: Syria. There, I won't let something to be constructed that would look like the one in Northern Iraq."

Öcalan: (got angry): "Tell him then, we will never let the Kurds assimilate within the centralist Syrian state. And, this is our red line!"¹¹

GEOPOLITICAL-STRATEGIC OUTLOOK VERSUS WISHFUL THINKING

The aforementioned conversation took place on November 9, 2013. Although the withdrawal of PKK fighters in the territory of Turkey halted, the peace process was still in motion, with all its ups and downs. The timing was months before the fall of the town of Tel Abyad that would link the Kurdish autonomous canton of Jazeera where, from east to west, Qamishli, Amude, Derbesiye, and Serêkani are situated in connection with Kobanê. At the date of the conversation, the three Kurdish cantons had no territorial continuity. Tel Abyad interrupted Jazeera's connection to Kobanê on the west and Jarablus interrupted Kobanê's connection with Afrin to its west. The border posts of Tel Abyad, Jarablus, and al-Rai on the Turkish-Syrian frontier were in the hands of the ISIL or ISIS. However, Tayyip Erdoğan drew Turkey's red line so as not to allow the emergence of a Kurdish entity in northern Syria like the one that exists in northern Iraq. What is noteworthy is his revealing of Turkey's acrimony vis-à-vis the KRG with which it ostensibly enjoyed exceptionally close relations. It seemed that if conditions were to permit, Turkey eventually would not hesitate to undo the Kurdish self-rule even if beyond its borders and at the cost of good political and economic relations. Erdoğan's words also indicated that Turkey prioritized the threat perception emanating from a Kurdish entity on its doorstep compared to the presence of the Islamic State in its proximity.

Formation of a Kurdish corridor adjacent to Turkey's southern borders, stretching from the Mediterranean to Iran, is in clear conflict with the Turkish state's geopolitical outlook that envisages using the same route to extend its influence to the Mediterranean—and this is a fact known by all those who have the privilege of inside information about Turkey's strategic choices. What is interesting here is that Erdoğan, who was believed to represent the peripheral segments of Turkish society against the traditional ruling elite, possessed and shared the same mindset on Turkey's geopolitics and its link with the Kurds.

During the same conversation, Öcalan also said in an angry and threatening tone:

If the anti-Kurdish alliance is pursued, the war would be inevitable. I told them [the Turkish government] to form an alliance in Syria. Because of Davutoğlu, two years is lost. Why erect the wall? Are you crazy? Why barbed wire, why laying mines? Are you crazy? The only thing they want is that the Kurds should not have power in that region. But if Kurds would not be there, a fascist regime would take over. As Iran supports Hezbollah, they [the Turkish government of Erdoğan] have to support the PYD.¹²

This statement reflected both Öcalan's reasoning and wishful thinking, yet the events did not proceed in the way he wanted. The Turkish state and Tayyip Erdoğan, who became a high-profile president in August 2014 leaving his former title as prime minister behind, were dedicated to preventing a Kurdish autonomous entity in Syria. The positions taken on such a sensitive issue by the leader of Turkey and the leader of the PKK were miles apart from each other and impossible to reconcile. President Erdoğan, on board the presidential airplane en route from Somalia back to Turkey, sounded determined to deprive the PYD of its gains in northern Syria. Speaking to the accompanying journalists on January 26, 2015, he said:

[Implying Syria's north] What would happen there? What has happened in Iraq would happen. We do not want the repetition of what happened in Iraq. What do I mean? North Iraq. . . . Now, North Syria would be born! We cannot accept this. I am aware that for Turkey, it is burdensome [to prevent the birth of North Syria]. But we have to keep our posture against such a happening. Otherwise, after Northern Iraq, we will be facing Northern Syria. Such developments will create big troubles in the future. There is an additional dimension to all this, that is to say, it is significant to see the implementation of new arrangements in Afrin, Kobanê, and Qamishli.¹³

With this explanation, Erdoğan made public the "red line" that he had already conveyed in private more than a year earlier and that had angered Öcalan.

Six months later, after the YPG cleared the strategically important frontier town Tel Abyad of the Islamic State, Erdoğan retorted once again. Tel Abyad's capture connected the eastern Jazeera canton under PYD rule with Kobanê on the west. Thus, the Kurdish autonomous territory in Syria extended in continuity for roughly 400 kilometers from the Iraqi-Syrian border—that is, from the Iraqi Kurdish territory—all the way to the Euphrates. Turkey's nightmare of seeing a Kurdish corridor parallel to its long Syrian border had nearly materialized. Tel Abyad's capture by the YPG also made possible the liberation of Raqqa from the Islamic State, deepening and consolidating the military cooperation with the United States. In reaction to such dramatic

developments, Erdoğan, as he frequently emphasized both before and after, asserted that Turkey would never allow the establishment of a Kurdish state in the north of Syria.¹⁴

David Gardner was quick to capture Erdoğan's irritation over the fall of Tel Abyad. On June 17, 2015, in his opinion column in the *Financial Times*, he described the Turkish President's attitude as "a striking collapse of judgement," and observed the reasoning behind it: "As he [Erdoğan] seems to see it, Tel Abyad coming after Kobani could lead to another self-governing Kurdish entity in Syria, alongside the KRG in Iraq and raising the specter of Greater Kurdistan, attractive to restive Kurds in southeast Turkey who also seek self-governing powers."¹⁵

"KURDISH STALINGRAD": SEPARATING ANKARA AND WASHINGTON

Kobanê stood as a challenge against Erdoğan's commitment to prevent the emergence of a self-ruling Kurdish entity in Turkey's proximity. In addition to its reputation as the starting point of the "Rojava Revolution" in 2012, Kobanê had become a legend for the Kurds in every part of the Middle East for its epic resistance against the Islamic State marauders who devastated it during the cruel siege that lasted more than six months in 2013 and 2014. It was also the locus for the inception of American-Syrian Kurdish military cooperation, which had obvious political connotations for Turkey and was the cause of considerable trepidation.

Kobanê sat on ground zero of the border with Turkey. Over 300,000 people, fleeing from the Islamic State's onslaught, took refuge mainly in Suruç, its twin Kurdish town on the Turkish side of the border. The siege of Kobanê stirred emotions among the Kurds of Turkey, and its resolute defense was hailed as "the Kurdish Stalingrad." Even the KRG president Masoud Barzani, although in acute rivalry and disagreement with the defenders of Kobanê, sent a military contingent armed with heavy weaponry through Turkey to Kobanê to contribute to the resistance carried out by the YPG fighters. Turkey gave way to American pressure to let the Iraqi Kurdish contingent cross its territory as a passageway. The Kurds of Turkey cheered deliriously at the sight of Iraqi Kurdish forces crossing in their midst, on their way to help the resistance of the Syrian Kurds. It was a rare display of pan-Kurdish national solidarity that transcended the region's national boundaries.

Tayyip Erdoğan, from the very first days of the Syrian conflict, had advocated the establishment of a safe zone within the Syrian territory. Apart from the practical and logistic reasons, it was thought that this would accelerate

the downfall of the Bashar Assad regime in Damascus. However, the Obama administration never was forthcoming with that project. Erdoğan's relations with Obama and the United States began to sour further when the Americans provided intensive air support for the defenders of Kobanê, under relentless siege from the Islamic State from three directions. Erdoğan never changed his mind concerning the establishment of a safe zone in Syria, but from 2012 on and especially after American-Kurdish cooperation was established in Kobanê, the prospective safe zone was designed to prevent Kurds from controlling any territory in Syria rather than accelerating Assad's downfall. As much as Kobanê was a challenge to Erdoğan's geopolitical calculations, it also served as an inspiration for him in carrying out his Syrian policy for thwarting the perceived American objectives and the creation of a Kurdish entity in northern Syria.

The siege of Kobanê started in September 2014 and continued until April 2015. The Islamic State's forces managed to capture more than half of the town and reached a point 100 meters from the center. The American air support arrived in mid-October 2014 and changed the fortunes on the ground. The support came both in the form of effective air attacks on Islamic State fighters, and airborne support providing weapons and food for YPG fighters and the remaining Kurdish citizens of Kobanê. Turkey was bewildered to watch its strongest NATO ally providing weapons and engaging in military cooperation with its perceived adversary. The crack that widened between Turkey and the United States in Kobanê deepened further in the wake of the town's liberation—which as any realistic assessment suggests, could not be achieved without formidable American engagement.

BLAMING TURKEY ON ISIS

While Turkish leaders resented the newborn American camaraderie with Syrian Kurds, seemingly the Americans resented the alleged Turkish connivance with ISIS. Brett McGurk, who was the special presidential envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, following his resignation from his post due to a falling out with President Donald Trump on the Syria policy, revealed the deep cleavages between the two allies, Turkey and the United States, in his seminal article in the May/June 2019 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. He was unequivocal in blaming Turkey for torpedoing the Coalition's fight against the Islamic State. Turkey had already attracted the criticism of Western media for serving as a "jihadist highway" providing support to the Salafist/jihadist groups in Syria. McGurk's blame put forward in 2019 was on the same wavelength as earlier criticisms widely shared in the Western media in 2014 and 2015. McGurk wrote:

In 2014 and 2015, Obama repeatedly asked Erdogan to control the Turkish border with Syria, through which ISIS fighters and materiel flowed freely. Erdogan took no action. In late 2014, Turkey opposed the anti-ISIS coalition's effort to save the predominantly Kurdish city of Kobanê.

Faced with Turkey's intransigence, the United States began to partner more closely with the Syrian Kurdish fighters, known as the People's Protection Units (YPG), who had defended Kobanê. The YPG struck the first blow against ISIS in Syria, and it soon proved adept at recruiting tens of thousands of Arabs into what would later become the SDF.

Turkey objected to U.S. support of the SDF. Ankara claimed that the group's Kurdish component was controlled by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a Kurdish separatist group that has fought an on-again, off-again war against Turkey for nearly four decades. . . . U.S. policymakers took pains to address Ankara's concerns. . . . Washington even sent its best military strategists to Ankara, where they tried to devise a plan to liberate Raqqa with fighters from the Turkish-backed Syrian opposition. In the end, it became clear that a joint plan with Turkey would require as many as 20,000 U.S. troops on the ground. Both Obama and Trump rejected that option, and in May 2017, Trump decided to directly arm the YPG to ensure that it could take Raqqa from ISIS.¹⁶

As Erdoğan's relations with Obama soured over the developments in Kobanê in 2014, the sentiments of Turkey's Kurds vis-à-vis Erdoğan soured as well. From the beginning of the siege, the Turkish military was positioned along the border a stone's throw away from the besieged town, watching the advances of the Islamic State forces. Rather embarrassingly, it acted as a bulwark to deter the thousands of Kurds who poured into the open fields near Kobanê in an effort to assist their kinsmen in their defense.

A week before the American military involvement on the side of Kobanê's Kurdish defenders, the Mürşitpinar border gate with Turkey was on the brink of being captured by the advancing Islamic State fighters. That led Erdoğan, on October 7, to deliver speech at a nearby border town, saying: "Kobanê is about to fall." The statement was interpreted by thousands of Kurdish demonstrators (who had taken to the streets in many Kurdish cities in southeast Turkey upon the call of pro-Kurdish HDP leader Selahattin Demirtaş for solidarity with Kobanê) as Erdoğan's ardent wish to see Kobanê taken over by the Islamic State. When emotions were at their highest, and the anti-Erdoğan Kurdish fervor reached its peak, clashes sparked more clashes between the government-supported Islamist groups and the BDP supporters in Diyarbakır, Batman, and other smaller Kurdish-inhabited centers, and ended with a toll of forty-three lives. The Kurds accused Erdoğan for his remarks regarding Kobanê. Erdoğan, on the other hand, accused Demirtaş of provoking the clashes by his call for solidarity. The feud between Turkey's newly elected

president and the critical mass of politically active Kurds delivered a fatal blow to the formally ongoing peace process.

The victim of the feud was not solely the peace process in Turkey. The kinsmen and political allies of Turkey's Kurds in Syria also attracted the hostility of Erdoğan and Turkish nationalists.

GROSS ERRORS

Turkey's military presence in Syria on the pretext of preventing the emergence of a Kurdish entity adjacent to its long frontier is observed in detail in Burhan Galyon's self-critical memoirs published in Arabic in Beirut, 2019. Dr. Galyon, the first chairman of the SNC, the umbrella organization of the Syrian opposition founded in 2011 and based in İstanbul accorded a special place to Turkey in his memoirs.¹⁷ He praised Turkey for never having interfered in the SNC's internal affairs, contrary to the general conviction spread from Damascus. For Damascus, the SNC from the very beginning was merely a tool of Turkey. Galyon, by contrast, asserted that Turkey, during the initial period of the Syrian conflict, tried earnestly to help Damascus to reform itself and thus to survive.

Burhan Galyon's fair treatment of Turkey, which he closely engaged with, in conjunction with the fact that his book is actually a self-criticism of the Syrian opposition—which he depicts as paralyzed and crippled in its inception and therefore structurally inept at fulfilling the mission of the Syrian revolution—adds further credibility to his assessment of Turkey's role in Syria. Galyon criticizes Turkey for being hesitant in the initial period of the Syrian war, ending the peace process with the Kurds, minimizing the danger posed by jihadi/Salafi Syrian opposition groups to the national security of Turkey, and providing logistical support to these groups. According to Burhan Galyon, if Turkey had not committed the errors in Syria that it did, it could have easily prevented the entry of Russia into the Syrian quagmire and could also have undermined the Iranian influence. These errors obliged Turkey, in time, to move closer to Russia to preserve a foothold in Syria. The founder and earliest chairman of the Syrian opposition organization, the SNC, emphasized that Turkey's errors led it to establish a military presence in Syria thereby becoming an occupationist regional power. However, Burhan Galyon concluded, its military presence established by the Euphrates Shield (2016–2017) and Olive Branch (2018) operations would not be able to block the achievement of Kurdish aspirations in northern Syria. Implicitly acknowledging the intertwined nature of the Kurdish question and Turkey's Syria policy, Galyon suggested that the only way Turkey could correct its gross errors in Syria was by returning to

the peace process with the Kurds. When he has published his book, the last and most crucial Turkish military incursion into Syria dubbed “Operation Peace Spring” had not taken place. In 2019, it occurred as a game-changer for the Syrian conflict.

Galyon’s assessment on the errors committed by Turkey in Syria became irrelevant with the successive Turkish military incursions into Syria, and especially with the last one which killed the faintest hopes of resuming the peace process with the Kurds. The ostensible impossibility of returning to the peace process in Turkey aside, Syrian territories with Kurdish inhabitants turned into a battle zone.

All in all, the peace process in Turkey (2013–2015) did not succeed in ending the long-lasting war with the Kurds, whose last phase was initiated by the armed struggle of the PKK in 1984.

An assessment on President Tayyip Erdoğan’s *modus operandi* connecting the fate of the Kurdish peace process in Turkey to the developments involving the Syrian Kurds was offered in *Foreign Affairs* August 9, 2019, by coincidence the same day the Turkish military operation was launched:

In 2015, his Justice and Development Party had lost its parliamentary majority for the first time in over a decade, owing in part to the unexpected success of a party representing Turkey’s Kurdish minority, parts of which had for decades fought their own low-level insurgency in the country’s southeast. To hold on to power, Erdogan struck an alliance with a far-right opposition party known for its strong opposition to Kurdish nationalism. The government’s years-long peace process with Kurdish militants in the southeast came to an abrupt end. Erdogan’s priorities in Syria shifted accordingly. Ankara was now determined to discourage Kurdish efforts to establish autonomy in the region spanning southeast Turkey and northern Syria.¹⁸

With the termination of the Kurdish peace process in Turkey, the armed struggle resumed, and as the most protracted Kurdish insurgency, transformed into a war for Turkey on a broader scale, extending into northwestern and northern Syria including the region east of the Euphrates, with its focal point encompassing the northeastern territories of Syria to the frontier with Iraq.

Syria was transformed into a battlefield between Turkey and the Kurds.

NOTES

1. Çandar, *Mezopotamya Ekspresi, Bir Tarih Yolculuğu*, 599–601.
2. *Ibid.*, 604.

3. Michael Werz and Max Hoffman, *The United States, Turkey, and the Kurdish Regions-The Peace Process in Context* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, July 2011), 423.

4. Amberin Zaman, “SDF Commander Says Kurds Are Ready for Dialogue If Turkey Is Sincere”, *Al-Monitor*, Syria Pulse, January 23, 2020.

5. Fehim Taştekin, *Rojava Kürtlerin Zamanı* [Rojava Kurds’ Moment] (İstanbul: İletişim, 2016), 148–53.

6. Werz and Hoffman, *The United States*, 26.

7. Cemal Özkahraman, “Failure of Peace Talks between Turkey and the PKK: Victim, of Traditional Turkish Policy or of Geopolitical Shifts in the Middle East?” *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 4, no. 1 (2017): 9.

8. *Ibid.*, 10.

9. Güney Yıldız, “Anatomy of the Turkish Incursion,” *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, Fall 2019, November 11, 2019.

10. Abdullah Öcalan, *Demokratik Kurtuluş ve Özgür Yaşamı İnşa (İmralı Notları)* (Neuss, Germany: Weşanen Mezopotamya, November 2015), 111.

11. *Ibid.*, 179.

12. *Ibid.*, 182.

13. <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dunya/erdogan-kuzey-suriye-istemeyiz-28056851>.

14. Cengiz Çandar, “Suriye’de iflastan maceraperestliğe” [From bankruptcy to adventurism in Syria], July 1, 2015, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/cengiz-candar/suriye-de-ifl-stan-maceraperestlige-29426493>.

15. David Gardner, “Erdogan Succumbs to the Fog of Politics,” *Financial Times*, June 17, 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/8c49072c-1438-11e5-9bc5-00144feabdc0>.

16. Brett McGurk, “Hard Truths in Syria,” *Foreign Affairs* 98, No. 3 (May/June 2019): 76–77.

17. Burhan Galyon, *Aatb al Dhat, Vakaya Thawra Lem Tektemul, Suriyye 2011–2012* [The fragile self: The annals of unfinished revolution, Syria 2011–2012] (Beirut: Al Shabaka al-Arabiyye al-Abhath wa al-Nashr, Arab Network for Research and Publishing, 2019), 401–404.

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Chapter 12

Neighboring Quagmire

TURKEY MARCHES INTO SYRIA

Turkey's direct military entanglement in the Syrian maelstrom has been achieved in three stages: "Operation Euphrates Shield" from August 2016 to March 2017, "Operation Olive Branch" in the northwestern-most Kurdish enclave of Syria, Afrin, from January 2018 to March 2018, and—the biggest in its scope and in the global repercussion it created—"Operation Peace Spring" beginning in October 2019.

Tayyip Erdoğan had instructed the Turkish armed forces to have operational plans for stepping into Syrian territory. In June 2015, the pro-government media outlets published these plans in detail. Accordingly, 18,000 soldiers would enter Syria from Karkamış, across from Syria's Jarablus, and Öncüpınar, north of the Syrian town Azaz, to establish a zone under Turkish military control that would be 28–33 kilometers deep and 110 kilometers long. In the areas with a depth of 10 to 15 kilometers, four brigades would be deployed. The security of the deployed Turkish troops would be provided by artillery with a 40-kilometer range that would be positioned on the borderline. The operational plan for the military incursion¹ was ready. The pretext was to thwart the preparations for creating a Kurdish entity. Notwithstanding, the influential elements in the high-ranking positions of the military were not enthusiastic about the idea of moving into Syria and holding territory.²

Yet, those elements were effectively purged in the aftermath of the botched coup of July 15, 2016. Almost a month later, on August 24, Operation Euphrates Shield was launched, characterized by President Erdoğan as acting "against terrorist groups that constantly threaten our country," referring to both the Islamic State and the Syrian-Kurdish YPG whom he had already defined as terrorists. His defense minister, on the day of the operation,

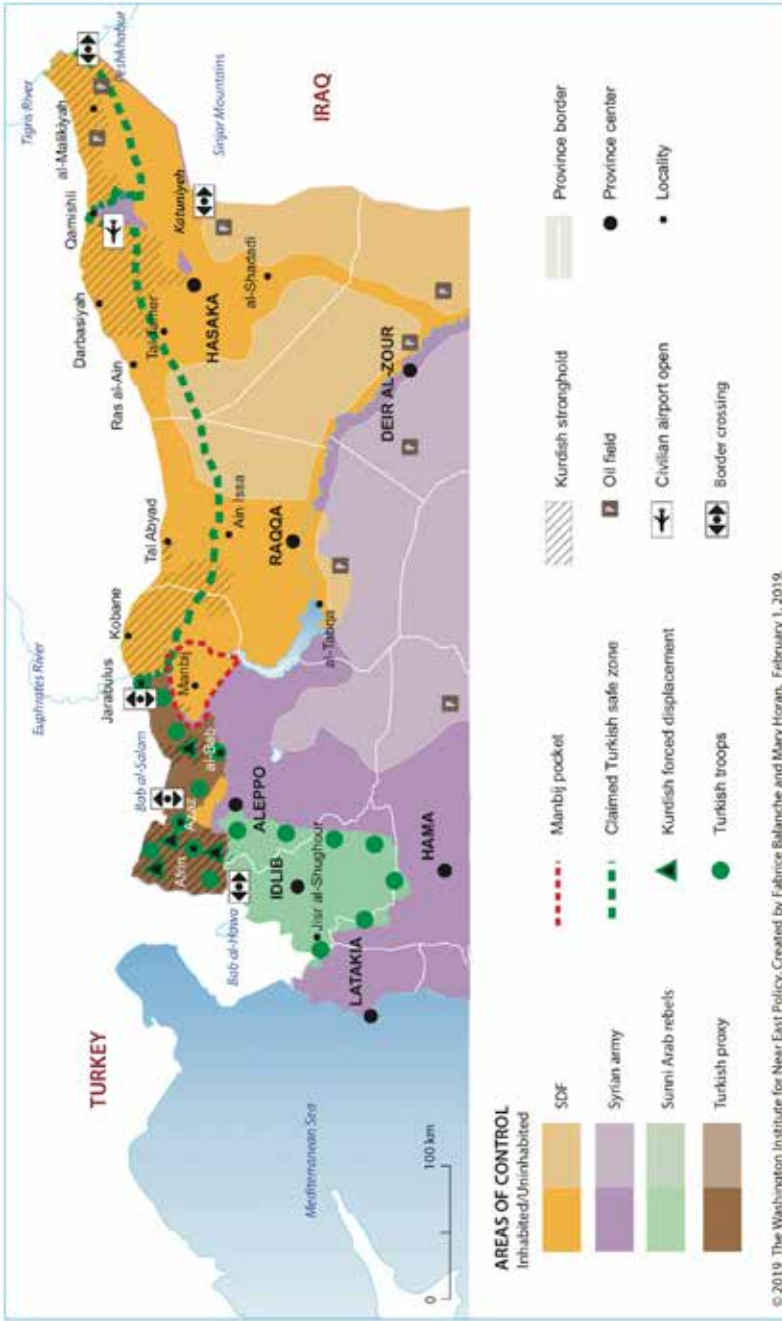


Figure 12.1 Turkish Safe Zone East of the Euphrates, February 2019. Source: Retrieved from <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Maps/Syria/MambijPocket-Feb2019.pdf> on March 21, 2019.

described the real reason behind Turkey's military intervention: "preventing the Kurdish PYD party from uniting Kurdish cantons in the east of Jarablus with those further in the west was a priority."³

With Operation Euphrates Shield that began on August 24, 2016, and ended on March 29, 2017, the Turkish armed forces and their Syrian Arab and Turkmen proxies secured a triangular Syrian territory of 2,000 square kilometers including the towns of Jarablus, Azaz, and al-Bab in the Syrian province of Aleppo. In so doing, they cut the link with the potential to connect the Kurdish cantons ruled by the PYD and defended by the YPG on the east of the Euphrates with the Afrin canton. Almost a year later Turkish forces, again with their Arab and Turkmen proxies, moved into Afrin. The military operation, facilitated by a Russian green light, started on January 20, 2018, with a massive air campaign and ended on March 18 of the same year. As a result, the entire province of Afrin at the northwestern corner of Syria fell under the control of Turkey, who would manage it with the tacit support of Russia, its partner on the Syrian battlefield since 2016. PYD rule and the presence of the YPG were effectively terminated in Afrin.

The Kurdish peace process had already been shattered by the resumption of the war in July 2015. There were multiple reasons for the failure, and in retrospect, they looked inescapable. Among these, Syria stands out as the major reason. With the collapse of the peace process, the unprecedented hopes for a nonviolent resolution of the Kurdish question were lost and the wheel of history once again turned toward war.

This time, the war was not confined to Turkish territory. Syria, with its multiple battlefields, had turned into a new war zone with the Kurds.

EAST OF THE EUPHRATES: THE PURSUIT OF A TURKISH SAFE ZONE

With Turkish military presence established between Jarablus and al-Bab, and especially since March 2108 when Turkey gained control of the entire region of Afrin, the area described as "East of the Euphrates" has been targeted by Tayyip Erdoğan for the establishment of a "safe zone" under Turkish military control. The Syrian territory controlled by Turkey at the time of writing stretched from "the Bab region near Aleppo through Kurdish-populated Afrin to a larger area around Idlib" where "some 17 percent of Syria's remaining inhabitants live, three-quarters of them in Idlib."⁴

The Turkish objectives for controlling Syrian territory were not confined to the area stretching from Jarablus-al-Bab to Idlib. Turkey's main ambition was to control the territories from the point where the River Euphrates enters Syrian territory right across to the Kurdish-majority city of Qamishli and even

further east of it to Derik (al-Malikiye) near the intersection of the Syrian, Turkish, and Iraqi borders, described succinctly as “East of the Euphrates.”

The Turkish demand for a safe zone “East of the Euphrates” has been synonymous with ending Kurdish self-rule under the PYD/YPG, in effect since July 2012. Although the official formation of this rule had taken place under the Syrian Democratic Council (the political arm of the SDF), an alliance formed by the Kurds with the Arab and Christian elements of the region, it was seen in Ankara as rule by Syrian Kurds closely related to the PKK, thereby constituting an “existential security threat” for Turkey. What was at stake was “a territory five times the size of Lebanon that is home to millions of Syrians and that sprawls well beyond the majority-Kurdish areas from which it sprang. This territory shares a 400km border with Turkey and is the locus of 80 per cent of Syria’s natural resources, chiefly oil and gas but also water and wheat.”⁵ More specifically,

The SDF controls Syria’s largest oil and gas fields (Al-Omar and Conoco), amounting to 95 per cent of Syria’s oil and 50 per cent of its pre-conflict gas extraction, as well as the waters of the Euphrates down river from the Tabqa dam, which it seized in 2017. The bulk of Syria’s wheat is grown in the northern provinces, with the north-eastern province of al-Hasaka continuing to earn its distinction as the country’s breadbasket, producing almost 40 per cent of its wheat.⁶

Turkey massed troops on the frontier during the last quarter of 2018, and President Tayyip Erdoğan frequently asserted he would take military action east of the Euphrates no matter what the cost. On January 8, 2019, he said, “Turkey is determined to eliminate the ‘terror corridor’ in Syria” and added, “for Turkey there is no difference between the PKK, YPG, PYD or Daesh.”⁷

The massing of troops at the Syrian border coupled with such statements indeed exerted pressure on the United States, which had mainly cooperated with the Kurdish forces of the SDF against the ISIS, and posed the risk of a military confrontation between the two allies.

The Americans tried to assuage Turkish concerns by contemplating the safe zone or “buffer zone” envisaged by Ankara. American president Donald Trump revealed that a 20-mile-deep safe zone in the northern part of Syria is endorsed by Washington. What leaked from Turkish military sources was that Ankara aimed to establish a 32-kilometer-deep, 490-kilometer-wide zone stretching from Kobanê on the west to Qamishli on the east and covering the whole region east of the Euphrates. That meant the effective dismantling of Kurdish self-rule over a vast region. Added to the Jarablus-al-Bab pocket and Afrin at the northwestern tip of Syria, the establishment of Turkish military control east of the Euphrates would bring almost all of northern Syria under Turkey’s sphere of influence.

The demographic and geopolitical complexity of northeast Syria could cause problems for Turkey as well. According to Fabrice Balanche, around 850,000 people currently reside in the proposed 20-mile-deep zone, bounded

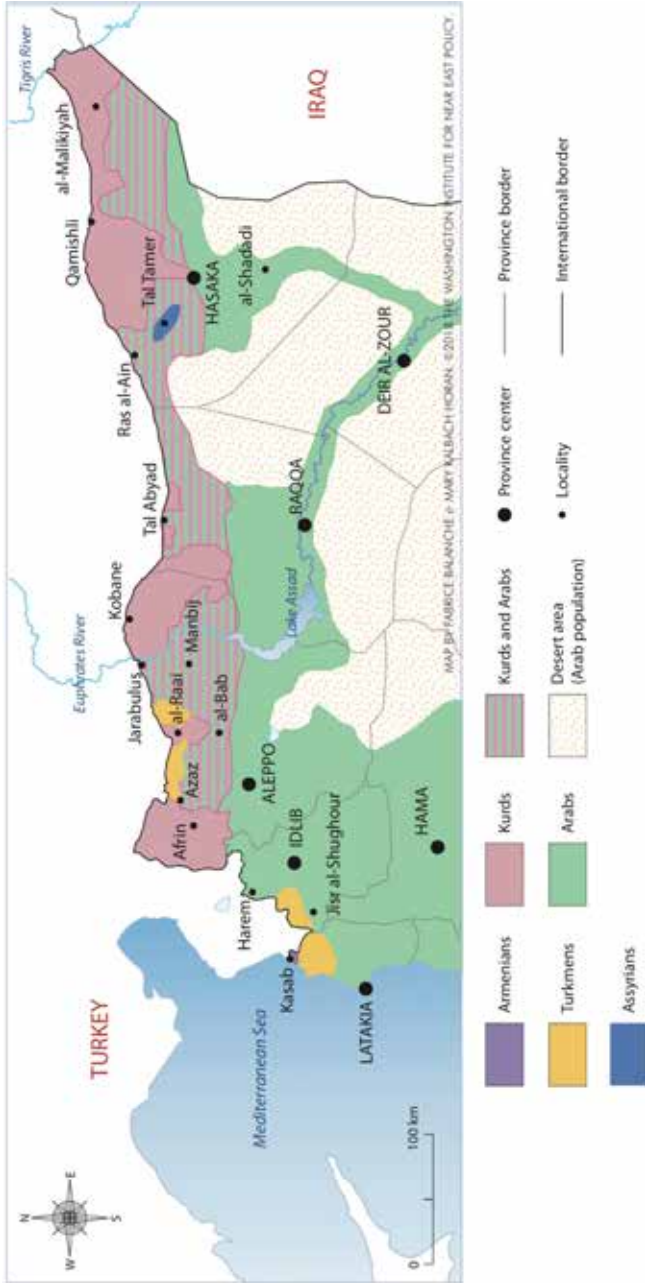


Figure 12.2 Ethnic Divisions in Northern Syria, 2018. Source: Retrieved from <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Maps/Syria/4-3-EthnicDivisionsNorthernSyria-hi-res.pdf> at March 21, 2019.

by the Euphrates River on the west and the Tigris River on the east. They include 650,000 Kurds (76 percent), 180,000 Sunni Arabs (21 percent), 10,000 Turkmens (1 percent), and 10,000 Christians (1 percent). Only one of the five districts that overlap the zone (Tal Abyad) has an Arab majority.⁸

The Turkish advocacy for a safe zone east of the Euphrates had a sweetener for the Western audience: establishment of such a safe zone under Turkish military control would maintain the possibility of settling more than three million Syrian refugees now in Turkey, whose flow into Europe is of utmost concern for the European Union.

DISPLACING KURDS, RESETTLING SYRIAN REFUGEES

Waving a map of Syria showing Turkey's proposed safe zone at the rostrum of the United Nations General Assembly in a rarely seen display of theatrics, President Erdoğan for the first time ever disclosed his intention of repatriating the Syrian refugees in Turkey to the presumed safe zone to be established east of the Euphrates River. His intention was interpreted as a scheme for ethnic cleansing since it would require the displacement of the predominantly Kurdish population of the region, thus raised fears of an ethnic cleansing. It revived memories of attempts at establishing an Arab Belt by displacing the Kurdish population of northeastern Syria and "Arabizing" the region, a plan developed by the Arab nationalist Baath Party that came to power in 1963. In 1965, it had planned to build a 350-kilometer-long and 10- to 15-kilometer-deep Arab Belt along the border with Turkey, from the Syrian-Iraqi border in the east to Ras al-Ayn (Serêkaniye) in the west. Hafez al-Assad (1930–2000), the father and the predecessor of President Bashar al-Assad, had begun to implement the plan in 1973 by establishing Arab villages and changing the Kurdish names within the zone considered as the Arab Belt.

Addressing the United Nations General Assembly on September 24, 2019, Erdoğan announced his plan of resettlement of Syrian refugees, interpreted as a tacit revival of the Arab Belt scheme of Syrian nationalists, in much wider and deeper territory of Syria he designated as a safe zone:

In Syria, there has been no genuine return to the regions controlled by the regime and the terrorist organizations PKK-YPG and Daesh. The parts liberated and secured by Turkey are the only places of return for the Syrians who fled their country for their lives. . . . [The] important issue is the elimination of PKK-YPG terrorist structure in East of the Euphrates, which occupies a quarter of Syria and tries to legitimize itself under the name of the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces. We will not be able to find a permanent solution to the issue of Syria if we fail to deal with all terrorist organizations in this country. . . . Our talks with the United States with a view to establishing a safe zone in Syria

continue. We intend to establish initially a peace corridor with a depth of 30 kilometers and a length of 480 kilometers and enable the settlement of two million Syrians there with the support of the international community. If we could extend the depth of this region until the Deir ez zor-Raqqa line, we can increase the number of Syrians up to three million who will return from Turkey, Europe, and other parts of the world to their lands in Syria. As we are determined on this matter, we have already started necessary preparations.⁹

Those “necessary preparations” he referred to materialized only two weeks later with the Turkish military incursion into Syria along a front that was nearly 150 kilometers wide. He once again tied his plan for resettlement of Syrian refugees to the safe zone he wanted to establish, with destroying the Kurdish-led autonomous administration in northeastern Syria. In a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed published on October 14, 2019, while the Turkish onslaught was underway, he said:

Since the Syrian civil war began in 2011, no country felt the pain of the ensuing humanitarian crisis more severely than Turkey. We took in 3.6 million refugees—more than any other country—and spent \$40 billion. . . . Yet at a certain point, Turkey reached its limit . . . we developed a plan for northern Syria. . . . I shared the plan with the world leaders at the last month’s United Nations General Assembly. In line with that plan, Turkey last week launched Operation Peace Spring.¹⁰

ERDOĞAN’S GOOD FORTUNE, KURDS’ MISFORTUNE

Besides his strong assets of shrewdness and determination, Erdoğan had the good fortune of having an American president as his soul mate in achieving his feverish objectives in Syria against the Kurds: “When Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told President Trump early this month [October 2019] that he planned to invade Syria, Trump said little to dissuade him. A White House statement after the call said only that the Turkish operation was about to begin, and U.S. troops were pulling back out of harm’s way.”¹¹

As much as evidencing a mutual understanding due to similar character features, Erdoğan’s belligerency vis-à-vis Syrian Kurds also served Trump’s domestic political interests since the withdrawal of American troops from the Middle East had been a mainstay of his campaign promises in terms of what he described as his unconventional foreign policy.

Throughout his presidency, Trump has shown a particular affinity for strongmen, such as Russian president Vladimir Putin, China’s Xi Jinping, and Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte. He has called North Korea’s Kim Jong Un a wise leader and a friend. “Those were always the guys he liked the most.

Erdogan, Duterte, Putin, Xi, Kim,” a former senior (American) administration official said. With Erdogan, Trump seems to have found a soul mate. Not only does he consider the Turkish leader “a tough guy who deserves respect” and “a friend,” according to another former senior official, but Erdogan has now provided Trump with a way to at least partially achieve his campaign promise to remove US forces from the Middle East.¹²

Among all the world leaders, the impulsive president of the United States liked most, it seemed that the trophy went to Erdoğan.

“ERDOĞAN WANTED TO WIPE OUT THE KURDS”

With such temerity did US president Donald Trump reveal Erdoğan’s outlook on the Syrian Kurds. On June 29, 2019, in a press conference in the aftermath of the G-20 Summit in Osaka, Japan alleged that Turkey’s president Tayyip Erdoğan wanted to wipe out the Kurds in the aforementioned area, but that President Trump had prevented his Turkish counterpart from achieving his goal. Trump, answering a question on the troubled relationship with Turkey, said, quoted verbatim:

He [Erdoğan] wanted to wipe out—he has a big problem with the Kurds, as everyone knows. He had a 65-thousand men army at the border, and he was going to wipe out the Kurds, who helped us with ISIS. . . . And, I called him, and I asked him not to do it. I guess they [Kurds] are natural enemies of his or Turkey’s. He hasn’t done it. They were lined up to go out and wipe out the people we were just defeated the ISIS Caliphate with. I said he can’t do that, he can’t do it, and he didn’t do it.¹³

With a similar preposterous attitude unexpected from a head of state, Trump disclosed the confidential letter he sent to Erdoğan, dated October 9, the day Turkish military incursion into Syria had begun—a historic document indeed, a very rare example of its kind in terms of its crude and coarse language. In Erdoğan’s words, it “did not conform with political and diplomatic etiquette”:

Dear Mr. President,

Let’s work out a good deal! You don’t want to be responsible for slaughtering thousands of people, and I don’t want to be responsible for destroying the Turkish economy- and I will. . . .

I have worked hard to solve some of your problems. Don’t let the world down. You can make a great deal. . . . History will look favorably upon you if you get this done the right and humane way. It will look upon you as the devil if good things don’t happen. Don’t be a tough guy. Don’t be a fool!

VOLTE FACE: ENDORSING TURKEY IN SYRIA

Almost a week later, following his decision to remove US troops from north-eastern Syria, thereby giving President Erdoğan the green light to attack the same Kurdish forces he had boasted about sparing, in a move that was quintessential Trump, he lavishly praised his Turkish counterpart. Speaking of Erdoğan, he said: “He’s a friend of mine and I’m glad we didn’t have a problem. Because, frankly, he’s a hell of a leader, and he’s a tough man. He’s a strong man.”¹⁴

In an odd volte face to his remarks at Osaka, Japan, in June 2019, where he took credit for stopping President Erdoğan who wanted to wipe out the Kurds in Syria, he condoned the Turkish military operation having the capability and capacity to displace tens of thousands Kurds from their abode in north-eastern Syria. Endorsing the Turkey-Syria border where the Turkish military intrusion started, he added:

So you have a 22-mile strip. And for many, many years, Turkey—in all fairness, they’ve had a legitimate problem with it. They had terrorists. They had a lot of people in there that they couldn’t have. They’ve suffered a lot of loss of lives also. And they had to have it cleaned out . . . the Kurds and other people—they’re going to be taken great care of. They’re going to be moving around—moving out of a safe zone, which is something that Turkey has always wanted.¹⁵

In less than a year, Trump’s admiration for Erdoğan coupled with his determination to pull back American military personnel from the Middle East as a staunch disciple of isolationism—a deep-rooted American foreign policy school—manifested itself in his dramatic shift of policy options: abandoning the Syrian Kurds and giving in to Erdoğan’s persistent demand of moving into northeastern Syria. In that sense, “Operation Peace Spring,” the Turkish official title of what many people around the world saw as the Turkish invasion of Syria, was nothing more than a postponed Turkish military move that could have started nine months earlier if the abandonment of the Syrian Kurds by the United States had not been resisted and contained.

OPERATION ADJOURNED

A most knowledgeable journalist of the region concerned and coauthor of *The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts*, Wladimir van Wilgenburg, noted:

Turkey had also publicly voiced its intentions to begin this most recent operation for months. In January, the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that “we will never allow a safe zone that will turn into a new swamp for Turkey like the one in Northern Iraq.” The goal of the current efforts can be understood as preventing the Kurdish Peoples Protection Units (YPG) in Syria, a principle component of the SDF, from gaining autonomy in the way that Iraqi Kurds were able to achieve after Saddam’s forces withdrew from northern Iraq in 1991.¹⁶

It was in December 2018 that American president Donald Trump made an unexpected and abrupt political move following a phone conversation with Erdoğan, and one that had significant consequences for international politics: he announced the ending of the American military presence in Syria. “East of the Euphrates,” he told President Erdoğan, “it’s yours!”

Brett McGurk, the special presidential envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, resigned in protest and wrote the following on *Washington Post*:

Trump made this decision after a phone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. He bought Erdogan’s proposal that Turkey take on the fight against the Islamic State deep inside Syria. In fact, Turkey can’t operate hundreds of miles from its border in hostile territory without substantial U.S. military support. And many of the Syrian opposition groups backed by Turkey include extremists who have openly declared their intent to fight the Kurds, not the Islamic State. . . . Trump’s latest proposal . . . for a 20-mile zone—which Erdogan says Turkey will establish . . . [will] encompass all Kurdish areas of eastern Syria.¹⁷

Erdoğan enthusiastically hailed Trump’s decision to withdraw American military personnel and hand over “East of the Euphrates” to Turkey. In his op-ed piece published in the *New York Times* on January 7, 2019, and entitled “Trump Is Right on Syria. Turkey Can Get the Job Done,” he wrote:

President Trump made the right call to withdraw from Syria. The United States withdrawal, however, must be planned carefully and performed in cooperation with the right partners to protect the interests of the United States, the international community and the Syrian people. Turkey, which has NATO’s second largest standing army, is the only country with the power and commitment to perform that task.¹⁸

The United States, in February 2019, revised Trump’s decision of total withdrawal from Syria and announced it would keep a peacekeeping force of 200

troops in northeastern Syria. The decision was interpreted favorably by the PYD/YPG while it caused some consternation in Turkey. However, the revision of Trump's decision of total withdrawal did not dissipate US concerns regarding the Turkish military incursion into northeastern Syria. Addressing that risk in his *Foreign Affairs* article "Hard Truths in Syria," Brett McGurk went further and unveiled the Turkish (or Erdoğanist) designs on Syria under the controversial subtitle "Ottoman Dreams" referencing Tayyip Erdoğan. He wrote that in several meetings he heard from Erdoğan that the Turkish president envisages a security zone for Turkey that extends from Aleppo in Syria to Mosul in Iraq. In the article, McGurk provided a map of Syria entitled "Divide and Rule, Syria's zones of great-power influence, December 2018." The map illustrates that Syria is divided into three main zones of influence: the first Russia-Iran, the second, the United States,¹⁹ and third, Turkey is shown in control of Afrin, Idlib, and the area north of Aleppo. Such a map, showing Syria divided into three different zones of influence among four major players, had never been previously published anywhere. Supported by the map, McGurk provided information on Turkey's anti-Kurdish designs in Syria relying on intimate personal knowledge:

There is now a risk that Turkey could launch an incursion into northeastern Syria similar to the one it carried out in January 2018 in Afrin, a Kurdish district in northwestern Syria. . . . There, the Turkish military . . . attacked the YPG, displaced over 150,000 Kurds (nearly half of Afrin's population), and repopulated the province with Arabs and Turkmen from elsewhere in Syria. This operation was not a response to any genuine threat but a product of Erdogan's ambition to extend Turkey's borders, which he feels were unfairly drawn by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. I have sat in meetings with Erdogan and heard him describe the nearly 400 miles between Aleppo and Mosul as a "Turkish security zone," and his actions have backed up his words. . . . Erdogan would now like to repeat his Afrin operation in the northeast. This would involve sending Turkish forces 20 miles into Syria, removing the YPG (and much of the Kurdish civilian population), and establishing a so-called safe zone.²⁰

McGurk's foresight was confirmed. On Wednesday, October 9, 2019, the Turkish army with its Syrian proxies who were Arab and to a lesser extent Turkmen, many with Salafi/Jihadist backgrounds being former elements of an-Nusra (al-Qaeda) and ISIS, and that were gathered under an umbrella named the Syrian National Army, began a ferocious ground assault on the Syrian Democratic Forces and its Kurdish backbone YPG in the principal axis between Tal Abyad and Serêkaniye (Ras al-Ayn), while Turkish fighter jets heavily bombed the largest Kurdish city Qamishli as well as Derik, close to the frontier with Turkey and Iraq.

OPERATION PEACE SPRING

The date of the war effort named ironically “Operation Peace Spring” was not chosen haphazardly. It was the 21st anniversary of ousting the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, under intense Turkish pressure, from Syria where he had resided for almost 20 years. Öcalan’s departure from Syria had ended in his eventual capture following a hapless odyssey that took him to Athens, Moscow, Rome, and finally to Nairobi, Kenya, where he was caught by a Turkish counterterrorism team. It was widely believed that the Central Intelligence Agency played a big role in tracking him, sharing information with Turkish authorities that enabled his capture.

Twenty-one years later the Americans, using the security mechanism they had established with Turkey, conducted joint patrols along the Turkish and northeastern Syrian border, which allowed the Turks to study the territory on the Kurdish-controlled Syrian side of the frontier and obliged the Syrian Democratic Forces and the YPG to dismantle the fortifications they had built to deter a Turkish military incursion and defend their territory. The Americans once again aided their Turkish ally in its struggle against the Kurds it considered affiliated with Turkey’s Kurdish insurgency.

For a military thrust against the Kurds in Syria who were presumed partners of the United States, American acquiescence was necessary. This was provided by US president Donald Trump’s decision not to stand against a Turkish military move into Syrian territory, once again following a phone conversation with his Turkish counterpart President Erdoğan. That phone call was made on October 6, 2019. Unlike in December 2018, the American personnel evacuated the Turkish military incursion route at the central sector of Erdoğan’s (or Turkey’s) designated safe zone, between Tal Abyad and Serê Kaniye (Ras al-Ayn). On October 9, Turkey began a military incursion that has sent the region into a level of chaos it has not seen in many years.

The Syrian Kurds were aware of the Turkish designs and had vowed to resist to the end, unlike their performance against the Turkish takeover in Afrin in January through March 2018. While Turkey interpreted Kurdish self-rule in northern Syria as a mortal security threat to itself, the Syrian Kurds envisaged Turkish designs east of the Euphrates not as “Ottoman dreams” but as an existential threat to themselves.

In an interview on *Al-Monitor* in March 2019, the fifty-year-old Syrian Kurdish commander-in-chief of the SDF, General Mazlum Kobanê (whose real name is Ferhat Abdi Şahin, yet he was also known by his other *nom de guerre*, Şahin Cilo, while he was in the ranks of the PKK), vowed that Turkish military intervention in east of the Euphrates would start the “second great war” in Syria. He said:

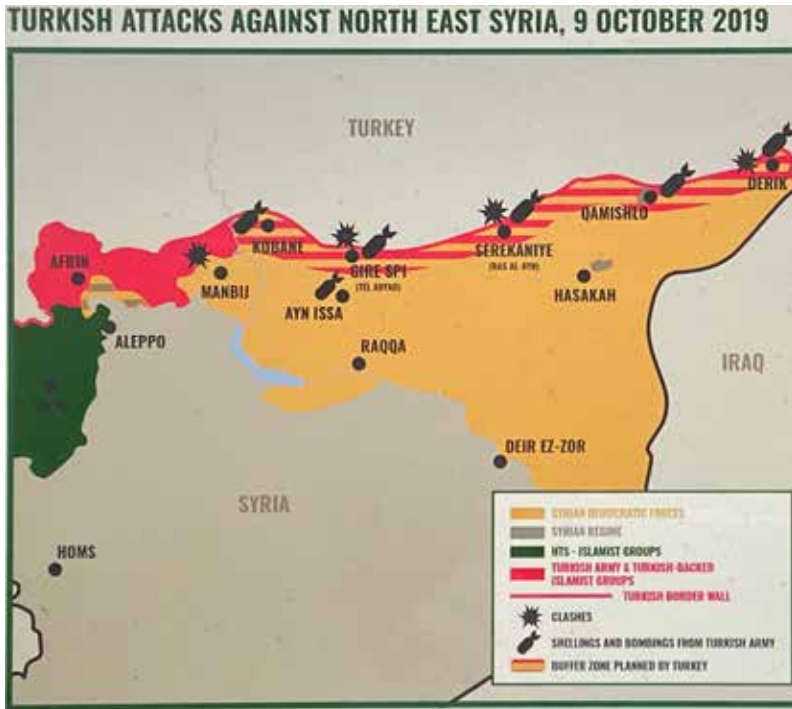


Figure 12.3 Turkish War on Northeastern Syria, October 9, 2019. *Source:* Map produced by Rojava Information Center, October 2019.

It's no cakewalk coming into the land east of the Euphrates. Any such intervention would unleash a big war. In fact, it would unleash the second great war in Syria. That is what we say and believe. And we have prepared for one. It's not easy. This isn't Afrin. It's a large area and there are many forces. And the intersection of international interests is different here. In Afrin, Turkey did a deal with the Russians. The Americans sat on their hands. Everyone is interested in this region. There are Russians in part of Manbij, in Arima. If Turkey intervenes, everyone will intervene. The situation will get extremely complicated. Turkey failed to get the green light from anybody to intervene here so far and will fail to do so in the future. . . . If Turkey continues to attack this area it is because of its inability to deal with the Kurdish movement in Turkey, because of its failure to address the Kurdish reality. It's 100% because of this. Turkish hostility has nothing to do, as it claims, with our alleged links to another group. Turkey does not wish to solve the Kurdish problem. It wants to eliminate the Kurds. It says so openly. The biggest part of the Kurdish movement is inside Turkey.²¹

In the same interview, General Kobanê, who is on Turkey's most wanted terrorist list, explicitly expressed the position of the Syrian Kurds on the "East

of the Euphrates” issue: “We have two principal demands. One is that our autonomous administrations here be preserved and accorded legal status. The second is that the SDF be preserved. The security of the territory east of the Euphrates River should be left to the SDF. These are our red lines.”²²

KURDISH “RED LINES” ERASED

Not long after his interview with *Al-Monitor*, during the fall of the year 2019, the “red lines” stated by Mazloum Abdi were overrun and virtually erased by the Turkish military invasion and the game-changer developments that ensued from it.

In July 2019, three months before the Turkish invasion, Mazloum Abdi Kobanê spoke with a group of Turkish and Kurdish journalists and expressed his views in a more elaborated fashion. He said the Syrian Kurdish forces were preparing themselves for a scenario where they might face Turkey without relying on American power, and reiterated that Turkey was committing a mistake in approaching its designs for the region east of the Euphrates as if it could achieve what it had in Afrin. He added:

The east of Euphrates and Afrin are not alike. There is a tremendous difference between the two areas. The international factor aside, even if we confront the Turkish army alone, the situation will be different. There will be a war that will continue for months if not for years. The east of Euphrates is a vast area. In Afrin, we had adopted a strategic decision to limit the fighting with Afrin region. Here [east of Euphrates], if the Turkish army attacks us, it will transform into an all-out war.²³

However, that was not exactly what happened when Turkey attacked the YPG. Erdoğan waiting for the opportunity to move relentlessly against his Syrian Kurdish adversaries, and events in the first phase of Operation Peace Spring highlighted the rapid deterioration of both the SDF and the ability of the United States to contain swifter-than-expected Turkish advances deep into Syrian territory.²⁴ Residents of northeast Syria said they were stunned by the speed with which SDF defenses appeared to be collapsing.²⁵

The Turkish military action and the withdrawal of American boots out of harm’s way forced long-feared population transfers and within the 48 hours of Turkey’s war in northeastern Syria more than 150 thousand people were displaced.

A KURDISH GAMBLE

The fifth day of the fighting brought a game-changer for the balance of power in the Syrian battlefield and the Middle East region with further ramifications

for the international system at the global scale. The Syrian Kurds, abandoned to the mercy of Tayyip Erdoğan by American president Trump, brokered an agreement with Russian mediation and reached a deal with the Syrian regime for bringing the Syrian army to be deployed along the frontier with Turkey.

It represented a gamble for the Kurds, who appeared to have secured no guarantees for the survival of the autonomy they have secured over the area over the past seven years. A senior Kurdish official said the Kurds felt they had no choice but to turn to Damascus in light of what he called the “betrayal” of the United States. “This has obliged us to look for alternative options.”²⁶

The commander-in-chief of the SDF and the Syrian Kurdish YPG, General Mazloum Abdi, in a dramatic piece published at noon Eastern Time in the United States and midnight in Syria, argued the motives of the Kurdish gamble in inviting the Syrian army, whose redeployment to northeastern Syria was denied by the Kurds, and the rapprochement with Russia whom the Kurds blamed for endorsing the Turkish occupation of Kurdish region of Afrin in 2018.

Mazloum Abdi’s words published at the most dramatic moment of the war in Syria read like an implicit obituary to the autonomous administration mostly and relatively successfully run by the Kurds for almost seven years in northeastern Syria. The introduction to the piece was about who they are and what they have done.

The world first heard of us, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), amid the chaos of our country’s civil war. I serve as our commander in chief. The SDF has 70,000 soldiers who have fought against jihadi extremism, ethnic hatred, and the oppression of women since 2015. They have become a very disciplined, professional fighting force. They never fired a single bullet toward Turkey. U.S. soldiers and officers now know us well and always praise our effectiveness and skill.

Amid the lawlessness of war, we always stuck with our ethics and discipline, unlike many other nonstate actors. We defeated al Qaeda, we eradicated the Islamic State, and, at the same time, we built a system of good governance based on small government, pluralism, and diversity. We provided services through local governing authorities for Arabs, Kurds, and Syriac Christians. We called on a pluralistic Syrian national identity that is inclusive for all. This is our vision for Syria’s political future: decentralized federalism, with religious freedom and respect for mutual differences.

The forces that I command are now dedicated to protecting one-third of Syria against an invasion by Turkey and its jihadi mercenaries. The area of Syria we defend has been a safe refuge for people who survived genocides and ethnic cleansings committed by Turkey against the Kurds, Syriacs, Assyrians, and Armenians during the last two centuries.²⁷

His piece continued with a reproach to the United States, asserting how trusting the Americans made the Kurds defenseless and made the swift Turkish military advance possible:

At Washington's request, we agreed to withdraw our heavy weapons from the border area with Turkey, destroy our defensive fortifications, and pull back our most seasoned fighters. Turkey would never attack us so long as the U.S. government was true to its word with us. We are now standing with our chests bare to face the Turkish knives.²⁸

The following lines were indicative of the desperate situation of the Kurds, which led their leadership to seek compromise with the Syrian regime and with Russia, which they do not trust whatever promises it might make.

We believe in democracy as a core concept, but in light of the invasion by Turkey and the existential threat its attack poses for our people, we may have to reconsider our alliances. The Russians and the Syrian regime have made proposals that could save the lives of millions of people who live under our protection. We do not trust their promises. To be honest, it is hard to know whom to trust. . . . We know that we would have to make painful compromises with Moscow and Bashar al-Assad if we go down the road of working with them. But if we have to choose between compromises and the genocide of our people, we will surely choose life for our people.²⁹

THE KURDS: THE WORLD'S LOST NATION

The hasty American departure from the Syrian battlefield, a main foreign policy decision of President Donald Trump clearing the way for the cherished goal of Turkey's President Tayyip Erdoğan, was interpreted all around the world, including in the United States itself, as a shameful American betrayal of the Syrian Kurds who had fought valiantly against ISIS. A *New York Times* editorial published following an American-brokered cease-fire in the first week of the Turkish military incursion (the Turkish side rejected it as a cease-fire, declaring it was only a pause in its military offensive to see the YPG forces leave the designated safe zone within five days) was striking in reflecting the perception and the reaction of the American political class to the developments following the fateful decision by Trump that led to the Turkish military move:

The betrayal was agonizing. The Kurds are the world's lost nation, their lands divided among five Middle Eastern countries that treat them as dangerous interlopers. They thought they had found a protector in the United States—Kurds in

Iraq had been America's allies, and those in Syria carried the brunt of the fight against the Islamic State. But then, casually in an Oct. 6 call with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, Mr. Trump abruptly sold them out, while also making an unexpected and unwarranted gift not only to Mr. Erdogan, who regards the Syrian Kurds as mortal enemies, but also to Mr. Assad and his patrons, the Russians and Iranians.³⁰

A BETRAYAL THAT LED TO ALTERNATIVE CHOICES

The commander of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces told a senior US diplomat, "You have given up on us." According to an internal US government readout that had been exclusively obtained by CNN, General Mazloum Kobani Abdi told the deputy special envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, William Roebuck, "You are leaving us to be slaughtered." Mazloum went on to say, "You are not willing to protect the people, but you do not want another force to come and protect us. You have sold us. This is immoral."

He insisted that the United States either help stop the Turkish attack or allow the Syrian Democratic Forces to strike a deal with the Assad regime in Damascus and their Russian backers. Mazloum told Roebuck that "I've been holding myself for two days from going to the press and saying that America abandoned us and that I would like you to get out of our areas now so that I can invite Russian and regime planes to take over this airspace. Either you stop this bombing on our people now or move aside so we can let in the Russians."³¹

Eventually, the Syrian Kurdish leadership of the YPG sought arrangements with the Damascus regime through mediation, which ended in letting in the SAA (Syrian Arab Army) and Russian military personnel into northeastern Syria. The American military presence and the autonomous administration under Kurdish control had denied the entry of the regime's forces and their Russian patrons to the area of the northeastern Syria. The Kurdish self-rule, officially called the North and Northeastern Syria autonomous administration, which was not accessible for the Damascus regime's security forces, was the Kurds' main leverage to wrest their rights—which they had been denied ever since the formation of the Syrian Arab Republic—in any comprehensive settlement for a future Syria.

A POSTMORTEM FOR KURDISH AUTONOMY

Turkey's military incursion on one hand was targeted to break the alliance between the United States and Syrian Kurds, but more than anything else it

aimed to terminate the Kurdish self-rule extending along its long borderline with Syria. “For the Kurds the dream of autonomy has ground to a halt. The new alliances taking shape on the ruins of their ambitions will be felt for generations in what remains of Syria. Iran and Russia are the dominant foreign powers now. . . . They will dictate terms in this region. Things have really changed,”³² wrote a reporter for the British daily *The Guardian* who was on the spot, in northeastern Syria.

In an astute appraisal, a former diplomat, Turkey’s first diplomatic representative in Iraqi Kurdistan and a leading Syria observer, Aydın Selcen wrote: “The Rojava experiment, like 1946 Mahabad Republic (Iran) or the aborted independence referendum at the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG-I) Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) whose backbone is formed by YPG/YPJ [the women’s branch of the YPG] . . . were obliged to compromise with Damascus.”³³

The reverberations of Turkey’s war in northeastern Syria and the fate of the “Rojava experiment” that had been saluted by the PKK as the “Rojava Revolution,” will be felt for generations to come. In a world wirelessly and electronically interconnected far beyond comparison with the era of the Kurds’ bitter experiences of the past, the impact of Rojava will be imprinted in the Kurdish psyche.

NORTHEASTERN SYRIA: A POTENTIAL VIETNAM OR AFGHANISTAN FOR TURKEY

In an analysis published two days beforehand, reputable Turkey expert for Israel’s opinion paper *Haaretz*, Zvi Bar’el, foresaw the inevitable rapprochement between the Syrian Kurds, Russia, and the Damascus regime of Bashar al-Assad in light of the American abandonment of Syria and the Kurds. In his analysis, he also uttered the prognosis that through protracted Kurdish warfare, Syria could turn into “Turkey’s Vietnam”:

The military option for Abdi’s forces is to persuade the Syrian army to join the Kurdish forces to fight Turkey, but Syria probably won’t want or be able to open a new front against Turkey, especially with Russia indifferent to the Turkish invasion. Russia did promise to try to mediate between the Kurds and Turkey to prevent massive bloodshed, but as far as Russia is concerned, a temporary Turkish occupation could later ensure the transfer of the conquered area to Syrian President Bashar Assad and spur the political process that Moscow is promoting.

A more realistic option is for the Kurds to start a broad guerrilla campaign against the Turkish forces, one that will turn the Kurdish region into Turkey’s

Vietnam. This *modus operandi* is the specialty of the Kurdish forces, which are facing Turkey with no air support and limited armored strength. It may also be expected that the Kurds will try to move the fighting into Turkey via mass attacks and direct hits in Turkish population centers, like the attacks the PKK, a Kurdish guerrilla movement, has carried out in recent years.

Time is a significant factor in this battle, especially for the Turks. The more massive the campaign and the quicker it reaches a decisive conclusion, the easier it will be for Turkey to evade growing international pressure. But the Kurds are in no hurry. A long and effective war of attrition can enlist public opinion in Europe and the United States, and above all, can stoke a mass protest in Turkey itself as its number of killed soldiers increases.³⁴

The analogy of northeastern Syria having the potential to be Turkey's Vietnam brought to my mind the worries of Turkish policy-makers that rather than Vietnam, Syria could be Turkey's Afghanistan—which, in turn, would make Turkey the Pakistan of the Middle East. A government official at the highest level of decision-making regarding the Syria policy had told me as early as 2014 that he had voiced his fears in National Security Council meetings that direct Turkish military entanglement in Syria would transform Turkey into the Pakistan of the Middle East while Syria would become Turkey's Afghanistan. He emphasized his assessment in face-to-face encounters with the then prime minister Tayyip Erdoğan and foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu with whom he had diverged on the Syria policy.

A possibility of protracted violence that might engulf Turkey and the Syrian Kurds was addressed also by Turkish-American scholar Henri Barkey, who had written a piece in *Foreign Affairs* in April 2019 entitled “Kurdish Awakening: Unity, Betrayal and the Future of the Middle East” and was disappointed by the developments half-a-year later:

What was recently Kurdish territory will likely be divided between Ankara and Damascus, an outcome that marks the end of the dream of Kurdish autonomy, at least for the time being. . . . After all, the fighting will at some point subside, and Turkey will control significant chunks of Syrian Kurdish territory. Rather than accept this new status quo, the YPG may engage in a guerrilla war, perhaps even with the encouragement of the Syrian regime. A new conflict will start, chewing up people and resources in a zero-sum game much like the Kurdish struggle against Saddam Hussein in the 1990s, only now the adversary will be Erdogan.³⁵

All such prognostication may prove to be spurious. On October 22nd, at the Black Sea resort city of Sochi, Russian president Vladimir Putin and Erdoğan, following an unusually long meeting for six hours, signed a Memorandum of Understanding with ten points. In the third of these points, it said, “In this

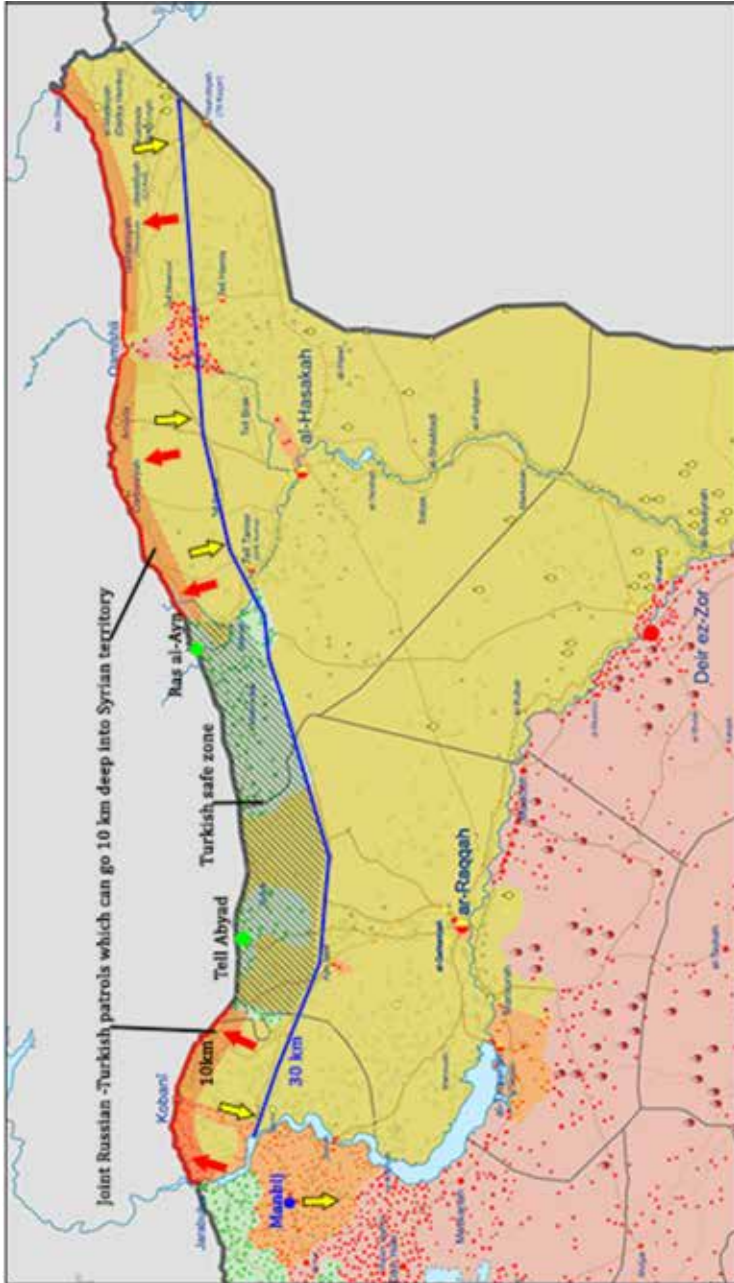


Figure 12.4 Northeastern Syria According to the Memorandum of Understanding between Russia and Turkey, Signed on October 23, 2019, at Sochi. Source: Distributed by Russian sources for public use.

framework, the established status quo in the current Operation Peace Spring area covering Tel Abyad and Ras Al Ayn with a depth of 32 km will be preserved.” As the new kingmaker also of northeastern Syria, replacing the United States, Russia’s Putin, albeit temporarily, endorsed Turkish military gains achieved in the “Operation Peace Spring.” However, Erdoğan’s aim of fully controlling his designated safe zone in northeastern Syria was contained. The Memorandum of Understanding stipulated the entry of Russian military police and the Syrian border guards “to the Syrian side of the Turkish-Syrian border outside the area of Operation Peace Spring, to facilitate the removal of YPG elements and their weapons to the depth of 30 km from the Turkish-Syrian border” and after the completion of this task “joint Russian-Turkish patrols will start in the west and east of the area of Operation Peace Spring with a depth of 10 km. except Qamishli city.”³⁶

The deal reached between Erdoğan and Putin signified, more than anything else, putting an end to Kurdish aspirations to autonomy as was envisaged by Abdullah Öcalan. A sober analysis highlighted, “The Turkish offensive into Kurdish-led northern Syria began on October 9 and ended with a deal brokered by Russia on October 22. Following the deal, the supporters of the Kurdish-led decentralization and democratic autonomy movement in Syria realized that their political dreams had collapsed.”³⁷

A NEW TURKEY IN A NEW SYRIA

At the time of this writing, Turkey’s future in Syria seemed uncertain. The fate of the region east of the Euphrates was also unclear. As Peter Galbraith, a former US diplomat, policy advisor, and the foremost American expert on the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds, similarly observed:

The full consequences of President Trump’s decision on October 6 to withdraw American troops and give Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan a green light to invade northeast Syria are not yet clear.³⁸

I met Peter Galbraith, a decades-old friend and a colleague of mine, in Duhok, Iraqi Kurdistan, in November 2019 in the aftermath of his travels to northeastern Syria and the Turkish military move. He had concluded his *New York Review of Books* piece with the following judgment:

The future of the Syrian Kurds depends on how events now unfold. . . . If Erdoğan resumes his war, the ethnic cleansing could be enormous.³⁹

Once a backwater in terms of political importance for the Kurds, the north and northeastern regions of Syria have since become the focal point of international attention. Turkey's Kurdish question is not only intertwined with that of Syria, but the violence introduced to that swathe of territory where Kurds live in Syria has become an integral part of American domestic political agenda because of the political choices made pertinent to the national security interests of the United States, during a period that witnessed increasing polarization of the American body politic. After the Syrian debacle and the way Turkey handled it, the Kurdish issue is of concern at a global level—alongside a host of other such thorny conundrums.

Turkey's incursion into Syria to suppress a Syrian Kurdish entry onto the stage of history, perceived by Turkish nationalists as an existential matter for the Turkish nation-state, has been among the consequences of the "New Turkey" that Tayyip Erdoğan has sought to found following his Faustian pact with Turkish "deep state" since the year 2014—and particularly in the aftermath of the mysterious coup attempt that took place in July 2016. This has been the period when Turkey's drift from the Western world accelerated toward a Eurasian vocation. The three-year Syrian chapter of the New Turkish state has been nothing if not a validation of the title of this book: *Turkey's Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds*.

NOTES

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Part IV

HISTORY OF THE FUTURE

Chapter 13

A Coup for a New Turkey

Selahattin Demirtaş stood up from the table where he was having his breakfast to greet and hug me. He was seated at the remotest corner of the dining hall in his Stockholm hotel overlooking Humlegården, the city center park housing the historic Royal Library building. When I was seated across him, he said, “Let me share the information with you what all this coup was about.” He was in haste. After our breakfast, he would be leaving for the airport to go back to Turkey. I did not think at that moment that this might be our last face-to-face conversation—he would be jailed in Edirne, a town on the Turkish frontier with Greece and Bulgaria. Alluding to President Erdoğan’s less-than-convincing statement that he had first heard of the ongoing coup attempt from his brother-in-law, Demirtaş sarcastically continued:

The brother-in-law is Russia. The information we have is that the Russians have told the intermediaries trying to resolve the crisis between the two countries, and between Putin and Erdoğan, that they had intelligence on certain movements within the Turkish military to oust the President. Yet, in order to share what they had, they made it conditional that Erdoğan first should publicly apologize to Putin.

Demirtaş then reminded me of the date when Erdoğan had publicly announced his regret for the downing of the Russian fighter jet by Turkish warplanes on November 24, 2015, which had deteriorated relations between Russia and Turkey. That apology was issued on June 27, 2016. “Remember: The coup attempt took place only three weeks after his [Erdoğan’s] public apology to Russia. In return, the Russians supplied with the intelligence about what is going on within the military. They [the government] were prepared in the

meantime. When the coup attempt took place, from the beginning to the end, almost everything was under control.”

What I heard from Demirtaş only confirmed my hunch that the Russians might have involved in thwarting the coup attempt. The purges following the failed coup were aimed mostly at pro-NATO and pro-Western officers of the Turkish military, and there was a widespread conviction that the “Eurasianists” in the army—those who advocate replacing Turkey’s security commitments to the Western world with the formation of close relations primarily with Russia and Iran—had gained the upper hand.

I was aware of the frequent travels to Turkey of Russian proto-fascist ideologue Aleksandr Dugin. He was the darling of a strong anti-Kurdish, anti-American, and anti-EU network that is considered embedded in the Turkish “deep state” indicted in the controversial Ergenekon case.

EURASIANIST BEDFELLOWS

Dugin was in Turkey on the day of the coup attempt. Just one day earlier he had been on a television talk show implying the upcoming coup, and advocating Turco-Russian rapprochement against those who allegedly wanted to remove Erdoğan from power. After the coup, he was received by then prime minister Binali Yıldırım and participated in the meeting of the ruling party’s parliamentary bloc. He was esteemed in the top levels of the Turkish establishment.

I was among the very few pundits in Turkey—if not the only one—who knew who Dugin was, and knew his Turkish connections. In September 2008, in a critical op-ed piece of mine entitled “*Avrasyacılık, Ulusalçılık ve Ergenekon’a Dair*” (On Eurasianism, secularist nationalism and Ergenekon), I had introduced him as a guru of Russian Eurasianism. I had emphasized that the so-called Turkish Eurasianists who were known to be pro-Russia (and thus, avowedly, anti-American) in the ranks of the Turkish military, and those who held connections with Dugin, had no genuine patriotic credentials.¹

In that op-ed piece, I warned my readers on the inherent dangers of “Eurasianism” subscribed by those pretending to belong to the leftist milieu. At its core, it was a rightist ideology disguised in so-called anti-globalist rhetoric, connoting an anti-imperialist stance to claim the moral high ground. Ten years later, in his *The Road to Unfreedom* with its rich material on contemporary trends in Russia, Europe, and America, Timothy Snyder was unequivocal about who Aleksandr Dugin is. He described Dugin in stark terms:

To speak of ‘Eurasia’ in the Russia of the 2010s was to refer to distinct currents of thought that overlapped at two points: the corruption of the West and the evil

of the Jews. The Eurasianism of the 2010s was a rough mixture of a Russian tradition developed by Gumilev with Nazi ideas mediated by the younger Russian fascist (b.1962). Dugin was not a follower of the original Eurasianists nor a student of Gumilev. He simply used the terms 'Eurasia' and 'Eurasianism' to make Nazi ideas sound more Russian.²

Dugin's connections with Turkey's failed military coup on July 15, 2016, were brought to light many times in the local and international media in the following months. In a surprising coincidence, as if to confirm what I heard from Selahattin Demirtaş, on October 3, 2016, the day after my conversation with him, the Turkish daily *Cumhuriyet* reported information provided by the chairman of the Union of Eurasian Local Administrations, a pro-government association, who had invited Dugin to Turkey on the eve of the coup attempt. According to Dugin's host in Turkey, the day before the coup, the Russian nationalist activist met with 15 MPs of Erdoğan's party before noon and with the top intelligence officials in the afternoon. In those meetings, Dugin spoke about the activity within the Turkish military. On the day of the coup (which started at 10 PM Turkish time), Dugin saw the mayor of Ankara, a leading AKP figure who is believed to be close to some circles in the military and the security establishment. He then left for Moscow the moment the coup was attempted.³

In the same report, *Cumhuriyet* also published Dugin's version of the developments. He said that since the beginning of December 2015, top-level Turkish military delegations on multiple occasions had gone to Russia to improve relations. He had been to Turkey in March 2016 on the invitation of the chairman of the Union of Eurasian Local Administrations, and during that visit some people close to Erdoğan had informed him on the plot concocted within the military against the president.

That is how we got into touch with the Turkish Eurasianists and the Kemalist military personnel. It was the Kemalist elements who told us that it is not the time to alienate Erdoğan. . . . Then, we began to develop our relations further. I cannot go into the details about what we have done, but I can say that we have taken a number of urgent steps. We have to pay attention to their consequences. The first among them was Erdoğan's apology. It was chivalrous.⁴

With that Dugin concluded his remarks.

DUGIN, THE RUSSIAN ROLE, AND THE COUP

A *Bloomberg* report on February 3, 2017, published an interview with Dugin that referenced his involvement regarding the coup in Turkey. It started

with the following phrase: “The Russian ultra-nationalist dubbed ‘Putin’s Rasputin’ by Breitbart News when it was run by President Donald Trump’s chief strategist, Steve Bannon, has emerged as an unlikely foreign-policy fixer for the Kremlin.”⁵

The following excerpts from the long report are informative on the development of an unusual partnership between Turkey and Russia that had made a big impact on the course of events in Syria—and therefore on the situation involving the Kurds, more than anyone else:

After Turkey shot down a Russian warplane along the Syrian border in 2015, prompting “World War III” to trend on Twitter, the firebrand philosopher used his contacts in both countries to form a backchannel that helped Vladimir Putin and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan end an increasingly dangerous feud, according to a retired Turkish general who flew to Moscow for secret talks. . . .

Dugin’s role in resolving the crisis with Erdogan over the jet incident was confirmed by Ismail Hakkı Pekin, a former head of Turkish military intelligence. He was one of five members of the Patriotic Party (correct English equivalent is the Homeland Party), including a fellow retired general and a retired admiral, who flew to Moscow in December 2015 for four days of meetings that Dugin arranged with current and retired Russian officers. During this visit, Dugin took the Turkish delegation to a “secret room” in a “special place” to meet his benefactor, Konstantin Malofeev, a multibillionaire with ties to the Russian Orthodox Church, Pekin said in an interview in Ankara. . . . Pekin said Dugin introduced Malofeev as Putin’s “right-hand man,” and the Turks came to learn the financier really can “knock on Putin’s door.” . . . Pekin said he and his colleagues were successful in convincing the Russian they spoke with, including two plainclothes generals, that rogue elements in the military were responsible for the shootdown. It was a “conspiracy” involving followers of Fethullah Gülen . . . who wanted to drive a wedge between Russia and Turkey, said Pekin, who briefed senior diplomats and military officials in Ankara after the Moscow trip.

In March, with tensions between Putin and Erdogan still simmering, Dugin flew to Ankara for a follow up visit that included talks with relatives of Erdogan and other influential figures. . . .

Three months later, on June 27, with Turkey’s economy squeezed by the trade curbs Russia introduced after the shootdown, Erdogan finally expressed regret for the incident, paving the way for a resumption of ties.

But less than three weeks later, on July 15, something Malofeev and Dugin warned about back in that “secret room” came true—an attempted coup by disgruntled members of the military according to Pekin.

Dugin has delighted in watching Russia and Turkey take the reins in resolving the Syrian crisis, elbowing the U.S. aside.

Erdogan with Putin's blessing, sent troops into Syria in August to fight Islamic State and U.S.-supplied Syrian Kurdish YPG forces, which Turkey views as terrorists for their links to autonomy-seeking PKK rebels. . . .⁶

In the same *Bloomberg* piece, it is also reported that Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, bluntly replied "No" when asked if Dugin played a role in the détente with Turkey. But it should not be ruled out that Peskov, who is fluent in Turkish, may have wanted to take credit himself for the rapprochement.

Aleksandr Dugin, in the wake of the botched coup, became a familiar name in the Turkish media, mainly concerning his connections with his Turkish friends and the information he provided to Turkish authorities. In an interview published in the Turkish daily *Gazete Habertürk* on November 6, 2017, praising his Turkish sponsor Doğu Perinçek,⁷ the chairman of the Homeland Party said, "If you describe Perinçek as the representative of the Turkish deep state, I, equally, represent the patriotic deep state of my own country, Russia."⁸ In the interview, Dugin, without providing any evidence, claimed the CIA spent \$2 billion for the removal of Erdoğan, and tried to cut the communication between Russia and Turkey on the night of the coup. However, he went on to say, the coup attempt failed thanks to the Kemalist officers who remained loyal to Erdoğan—which had been the CIA's miscalculation. Questioned on the source of the information he passed on to Turkish intelligence officials about activities within the Turkish military concerning the coup attempt, he responded, "It will not be proper to make such information public. But, of course, there was an involvement of the Russian intelligence."⁹

In the interview, Dugin claimed the Kurds were prepared to start a rebellion if the coup proved successful. According to him, the failure of the coup prevented an imminent Kurdish rebellion.

His support of the Turkish government against the Kurds extended to the military operation that ended Kurdish rule in Syria's northwestern tip, Afrin, in January–March 2018. In a very similar terminology to that employed by Turkish officialdom, in an interview with the Turkish television channel NTV Dugin said, "The operation in Afrin is not against the Kurdish people, it is solely against the terrorist force, the tools of America."¹⁰

"BLOOD MONEY" PAID TO MOSCOW

The third anniversary of the coup, July 2019, coincided with Turkey's purchase of the Russian air defense missile system S-400, which sparked significant contention between Turkey and its erstwhile closest ally, the United

States, and caused an unprecedented rift in NATO's security structure. As a Moscow-based Turkish political analyst who holds a PhD from Moscow State University and has focused on Turkey-Russia relations, security issues, and energy politics in Eurasia, Dr. Kerim Has provided a striking analysis from Moscow on the coup, claiming that the S-400 deal was actually the "blood money" paid by Erdoğan to Russia for its support in thwarting the coup attempt.

After Turkey shot down a Russian Su-24 airplane in November 2015, bilateral relations reached their nadir and Russia steadily ramped up pressure on President Erdogan. In early March 2016, Russia's permanent representative presented the UN Security Council with evidence alleging the ties between the Turkish government and terrorist organizations, primarily ISIS and al-Nusra Front, including its involvement in illegal trade in oil. . . . [I]n April President Erdogan sent mediators to Russia to discuss reconciliation with President Vladimir Putin. Several months later, in late June 2016, President Erdogan issued a letter of apology for the fighter jet incident.

Shortly thereafter a mysterious coup attempt took place in Turkey on July 15th, 2016, and the government responded with a massive, still ongoing crack-down. The question of who exactly was behind the coup attempt still needs to be answered in an objective way, after a thorough investigation. However, the leader of Turkey's main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), Kemal Kilicdaroglu, asserted that the coup was "controlled," claiming that the Turkish government knew it in advance but didn't stop it. This argument is in line with the narrative in Russia. In Moscow, it is well known that the military, diplomatic, and intelligence services notified their Turkish counterparts at the highest level, many days in advance, about the details of an upcoming coup attempt, giving the day and time. If it is true that the Turkish authorities had a direct role in the coup attempt, then it complicates the situation even more, but also clarifies the need for President Erdogan to sign the S-400 deal—and Moscow's main point of leverage.

If a "fictitious" coup plan really was put into effect on July 15th, then not being solely dependent on leading Western powers—particularly the United States—seems logical, as it would help to overcome further problems in relation to deepening authoritarianism and weakening domestic legitimacy. Within that context, thawing relations with Russia by sending an apology letter to expand the room for maneuver before executing such a coup plan would also make sense, as would starting negotiations on the S-400s after the so-called coup attempt. This would make the missile deal not only "political bribery," but also "blood money" paid by the Turkish leadership to Moscow to ensure the latter's support.¹¹

In fact, Russian press in the immediate aftermath of the coup carried stories of dubious involvement of Russian intelligence in thwarting the coup in Turkey. Writing in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* only two weeks after the coup attempt, well-known military historian and writer Alexander Shirokorad supplied detailed and interesting information on Russian involvement in his sarcastically written assessment:

It is difficult to assume that the Russian special services did not know about the preparation of the coup. Turkey is literally surrounded by Russian radio interception stations and over-the-horizon radars—in Syria, Armenia, Crimea and on ships patrolling the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea. Dozens of different reconnaissance spacecraft should be added to them.

It can be assumed that, quite by accident, the average reconnaissance ship Equator left Sebastopol on July 12 and ended up in the Strait zone by the time of the coup. For three days the Equator was in the Strait, and on the night of July 16, in the Aegean Sea near Marmaris, where Erdogan was resting. Erdogan, warned by no one, knew [what is going on] and flew out of Marmaris on a small business jet, and then circled over the Aegean Sea for about two hours. Erdogan's plane was accompanied by two F-16 fighters, which allegedly received orders to destroy the president. It turns out that, quite by accident, Erdogan's plane rolled circles over the Equator. It is curious if the Equator equipment was turned on, which could completely "blind" both F-16s and deprive them of the ability to use airborne weapons. . . .

It was also quite by accident that both missile submarines of the Black Sea Fleet—Novorossiysk and Rostov-on-Don—with full ammunition on the night of July 15–16, were near the Bosphorus. . . .

It is completely coincidental that literally in the first minutes of the coup tens of thousands of citizens, almost all men of military age, quickly came to the streets of Istanbul, Ankara and other Turkish cities. They were perfectly organized, knew the routes of the rebel columns, and very competently stopped armored vehicles. Apparently, this is also a coincidence.¹²

Whether or not Russia played a decisive role in thwarting the attempt, the clouds of mystery surrounding the events on July 15, 2016, never entirely dissipated and probably never will. The underlying truth may remain shrouded, and therefore an eternal doubt has been cast on a development, which was introduced as a milestone in the birth of the "New Turkey" as envisioned by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his loyalists. The questions that arose even while the coup attempt was continuing have yet to be answered. The attempt was in its 15th minute when I learned it was unfolding and from that moment on, I was never convinced that it could achieve its avowed aim of

removing Erdoğan from power. To me, the military coup was doomed to fail due to the way it was executed. I was more wary regarding the consequences of its inevitable failure, than concerning its unlikely success. I had a hunch that it would have devastating effects on the state of democracy in Turkey, affecting the lives of the entire population with a bearing on the regional balance of power. The coup was in its 24th hour and on the verge of collapse when I sat down to write an article for *Al-Monitor*, where I had worked as a columnist since its day one in 2012. I had a title already in mind: “Turkish Coup: What Was It? More Questions Than Answers.” To me, the coup was indeed loaded with more questions than the answers offered. Now, three years later, this remains unchanged.

MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

My assessment of the coup, which I suggested to *Al-Monitor* on July 16 at 12:39 p.m. (European Time) and submitted at 06:39 p.m., was published the next day. In retrospect, it stood out as one of the earliest challenges to the official narrative about the coup. The following lines should be on the record since they proved to be time-resistant:

While the Turkish coup was underway, The New York Times was asking me whether I was surprised, expecting my answer to be, “Of course I am.” I bluntly wanted to respond “No” and remind New York Times correspondent Sabrina Tavernise that only two weeks ago, in our lengthy chat in Istanbul, I had told her of the “Faustian bargain President [Recep Tayyip] Erdogan made with the military, which therefore, in my opinion, opened the way for a coup or a coup attempt to take place in Turkey within the upcoming two years.” But I conceded and told her, “Yes, I’m surprised. I did not expect that to happen in two weeks.”

More surprising for me is the amateurishness of the attempted coup on the night of July 15. As a veteran observer of military coups and coup attempts in Turkey, I have never seen any with this magnitude of such inexplicable sloppiness. . . .

Everyone observing the last attempt could not help but ask, “What is this? Who is behind this? What are they doing? Why?”

Why did the coup attempt begin with blocking one side of Istanbul’s Bosphorus Bridge? Why was the passage from the Asian side to Europe blocked while the passage from Europe to Asia was allowed to flow?

Why did the putschists—knowing that Erdogan was neither in Ankara nor Istanbul but instead spending his vacation in the Mediterranean seaside town of Marmaris—not move to detain him? They let him travel from Marmaris to the nearby Dalaman airport and then fly to Istanbul on a flight that took over an hour. . . .

Seemingly a headless and disoriented coup attempt crumbled after a few hours, leaving 265 dead, some 1,440 wounded and at least 2,839 military personnel in custody.

The failed attempt left more questions behind rather than plausible answers as to who perpetrated it and why it was executed so sloppily and poorly. . . .

Twenty-four hours had not passed after the collapse of the coup attempt when 140 judges—judges of the Court of Appeals and 48 judges of the Council of State, two of the highest judiciary institutions—were taken into custody. Summarily purged from the judiciary apparatus were another 2,475 judges. A member of the Constitutional Court, the highest institution of the judiciary, was arrested and charged with association with the putschists.

The swiftness and scope of the action of the executive branch was remarkable. It gave the impression that Erdogan and the government were prepared for a coup attempt and had ample intelligence as to who in the state system would be associated with it.

Looking at the 2,839 military personnel under arrest, including scores of generals who commanded the combat units of a NATO army, it is quite bizarre that no security bureaucracy from the military intelligence to the National Intelligence Organization, the General Directorate of Security and Special Forces Command had a clue that a coup was being hatched at such a magnitude.

Such matters await convincing answers.¹³

The irony is that after almost four years, as this book is being written, they still do.

WHY DID THE COUP FAIL?

After I filed and sent my assessment on the failed coup in Turkey, on the internet, I came across Edward Luttwak's piece entitled "Why Turkey's Coup d'Etat Failed." It was posted at 10:36 AM, EDT. It was late afternoon when I had written my assessment on the coup, and Luttwak, as his title may suggest, had not only arrived at the conclusion that the coup had failed but also was offering an explanation on the reasons behind its failure. He was an internationally acclaimed expert on the matter of coups d'etat.

Luttwak was a respected political scientist in Washington DC, who is also believed to be influential within the American political establishment on issues of grand strategy, military history, and international relations. He was once introduced referring to his residence in the outskirts of Washington as "The Machiavelli of Maryland." On it, the British daily *The Guardian* wrote, "His reputation still rests on his 1968 book *Coup d'Etat: A Practical Handbook*, published when Luttwak was twenty-six. The book was praised by John Le Carré and warmly reviewed by critics on the left and the right. "One suspects

that, like Machiavelli himself, he enjoys truth not only because it is true but also because it shocks the naïve” wrote Eric Hobsbawm,¹⁴ the renowned British Marxist historian. Luttwak’s *Coup d’Etat* has also been characterized as “a great work of political science that is also a hilarious satire.”

I naturally read his assessment on the Turkish coup with deep interest. After all, he was the author of *Coup d’Etat, A Practical Handbook*, which has been reprinted numerous times, and translated into eighteen languages.

Not concealing his disdain for Erdoğan and apparently under the influence of Bernard Lewis—the Princeton scholar and for decades the foremost expert on Turkey in the United States who interpreted contemporary Turkish history within the general framework of the struggle between the secularist-progressive, that is, Kemalist elements and the reactionary Islamists—Luttwak’s assessment had some flaws. He nevertheless was true to the tone of total confidence, which was seen as part of his success in his intellectual career. Luttwak bluntly underlined the violations against the textbook rules for a military coup to succeed, and in his typical satire he wrote:

Rule No. 2 in planning a successful military coup is that any mobile forces that are not part of the plot—and that certainly includes any fighter jet squadrons—must be immobilized or too remote to intervene. . . . But the Turkish coup plotters failed to ensure these loyal tanks, helicopters, and jets were rendered inert, so instead of being reinforced as events unfolded, the putschists were increasingly opposed. But perhaps that scarcely mattered because they had already violated Rule No. 1, which is to seize the head of the government before doing anything else, or at least to kill him.

The country’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, was left free to call out his followers to resist the attempted military coup, first by iPhone and then in something resembling a televised press conference at Istanbul’s airport. . . .

Televised scenes of the crowds that came out to oppose the coup were extremely revealing: There were only men with mustaches (secular Turks rigorously avoid them) with not one woman in sight. Moreover, their slogans were not patriotic, but Islamic. . . .

When Erdogan foists the blame for anything that goes wrong—including his very own decision to restart the war against the country’s Kurds—on foreigners, the United States. . . His followers readily believe him. That is also true of his wild accusations of terrorism against the U.S.-based Turkish religious leader Fethullah Gulen, once his staunch ally. Erdogan is now blaming Gulen and his followers for the attempted military coup as well. That could be true to some extent, but Turkish military officers scarcely needed Gulen to egg them on: They blame Erdogan and his AKP followers for dismantling Ataturk’s secular republic; for having built up the murderous Sunni extremists of Syria who are

now spilling back into Turkey to conduct suicide bombings; and for deliberately restarting the war against the country's Kurds in 2015 for crass political reasons—a war that is costing soldiers' lives every day and threatens the survival of Turkey itself within its present borders. . . .

Coup planners need not enroll very many soldiers or airmen to win, so long as uncooperative chiefs are apprehended, and their initial success induces more to join in. But Turkey's top military chiefs neither planned the coup nor joined it, and only a few (including the supremo Gen. Hulusi Akar) were detained. Indeed, the principal force commanders stayed out so that the coup activists (fewer than 2,000 in all, it seems), including some fighter pilots, were hopelessly outnumbered once Erdogan's followers came out by the tens of thousands in the streets of Istanbul. Opposition parties all very loyally opposed the coup, but they should not count on Erdogan's gratitude. The drift to authoritarian rule is likely to continue, even accelerate. . . .¹⁵

In the aftermath of the coup attempt, participation of only 1.5 percent of the Turkish military was revealed. Although the Gülenist involvement in it seemed an incontestable fact, the considerably low participation was far from posing a genuine threat for power in Turkey.

SPECULATIONS AND BAFFLING AMATEURISHNESS

The apparent poor planning of the coup and the inexplicable amateurishness in its execution that would betray the quality of professionalism of the officer corps of the second largest military force in NATO, coupled with the scope and swiftness of the purges in its aftermath led some to think—and allege—that the coup d'état was in fact staged by Erdoğan himself so as to stifle dissent and establish his autocratic rule.

For some, like Harvard professor of Turkish background Dani Rodrik, it was at least baffling. On July 17, Rodrik wrote,

Military coups—successful or otherwise—follow a predictable pattern in Turkey. Political groups—typically Islamists—deemed by soldiers to be antagonistic to Kemal Atatürk's vision of a secular Turkey gain increasing power. Tensions rise, often accompanied by violence on the streets. Then the military steps in, exercising what the soldiers claim is their constitutional power to restore order and secular principles.

Drawing attention to the difference of the coup on July 15, he asserted that, while no one expected a military-led putsch attempt at that period,

No less baffling was the almost amateurish behavior of the putschists, who managed to capture the chief of general staff but apparently made no meaningful attempt to detain Erdoğan or any senior politician. Major television channels were allowed to continue to operate for hours.¹⁶

His conclusion was, “What is certain that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan will use the episode to tighten his grip on power”—which indeed has been almost a consensus among all those who were baffled by the amateurish execution of the coup, and remained unconvinced from the very beginning of its real purpose.

TURKEY’S REICHSTAG FIRE

In the aftermath of the coup, the debate on whether it was controlled or staged continued on unabated. Equally expansive was identification of the attempt with the Reichstag Fire in 1933 Germany, which was a milestone in consolidation of the Nazi regime. The analogy, with the label “Turkey’s Reichstag Fire” that was picked up and carried in the international arena, surprisingly and interestingly was first used on July 16 as the coup was still unfolding, by Prof. Ayşe Kadioğlu, one of Turkey’s most brilliant political scientists. Under the title “Coup d’Etat Attempt: Turkey’s Reichstag Fire,” she wrote a fascinating personal account of what she witnessed while the coup was underway coupled with sharp observation on what it would entail for Turkey.

Joining the echo of the calls to prayers were the loud noises of military jets flying over Istanbul skies. The combination of these sounds made me think that yes, these were the sounds of the funeral of free speech, critical thinking, and any other remnants of liberal democratic process in Turkey. I realized in fear and agony that whether the coup was successful or not, one thing was certain: there would no longer be room in Turkey for people who can listen, read, analyze, and think critically. . . .

The Reichstag fire was also a last nail in the coffin of the possibility of basic freedoms as well as critical thinking in Germany. On the evening of the Reichstag fire, Chancellor Hitler was relaxing at a dinner party in Joseph Goebbels’ home. The fire was soon blamed on a demented Dutch Communist named Marinus van der Lubbe who had a record of crimes of arson. The reality behind the Reichstag fire was not even clarified during the Nuremberg trials. Still, there was a lot of evidence that pointed to the responsibility of the Nazis behind it. But what was important was not so much who set fire to the Reichstag but rather what came out of it. . . .

There is no doubt that we are witnessing the consolidation of a new form of authoritarian regime with a populist streak. I cannot help but remember a quote

by Barrington Moore (Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy, Beacon Press, Boston, 1966 [1993], p. 447): “fascism is inconceivable without democracy or what is sometimes more turgidly called the entrance of the masses onto the historical stage. Fascism was an attempt to make reaction and conservatism popular and plebeian, through which conservatism, of course, lost the substantial connection it did have with freedom.”¹⁷

A week later, another academician with Turkish origins, Ozan Varol, the author of *The Democratic Coup d'Etat* (published in 2017), using the same analogy entitled his article “Turkey’s Reichstag Fire.” He wrote:

On February 27, 1933, a fire broke out in the Reichstag building, which housed the German Parliament in Berlin. Although the fire’s origins remain shrouded in mystery, the Nazi Party blamed the attack on communists plotting to overthrow the German government. Making an appearance at the scene of the fire, Chancellor Adolf Hitler was surprisingly jubilant: “You are now witnessing the beginning of a great epoch in German history,” he continued, “This fire is the beginning.”

Drawing parallels between the declaration of state of emergency after the Reichstag fire in Germany, and the state of emergency put in force within a week following the coup attempt in Turkey, Varol continued:

Undoubtedly, there are real differences between the Reichstag fire and last Friday’s coup attempt in Turkey. Although historians disagree, the Reichstag fire may have been a masterfully executed hoax, but the Turkish coup attempt will rank among the most incompetent in history, with the plotters severely miscalculating the monumental effort required to topple a stable government. And despite speculations to the contrary, there is no credible evidence that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan staged the Turkish coup attempt.

Despite significant differences, some unsettling resemblances also exist between the two events. The Turkish government, like its historical German counterpart, has seized the event as an opportunity to conduct widespread purges of political dissidents and consolidate power. Following the coup, President Erdoğan immediately vowed revenge against the coup plotters and warned that they would pay “a heavy price for their treason.” He specifically pointed the finger at Fetullah Gülen. . . . An alliance of convenience between Gülen and Erdoğan broke down in recent years. . . .

President Erdoğan, apparently a firm believer in the adage that a good scandal should never go to waste, authorized an immediate crackdown against so-called Gülenists. The numbers are dizzying. In less than a week after the coup attempt, the government detained 6,823 soldiers, 2,777 judges and prosecutors (including two judges on the Turkish Constitutional Court), and dozens of governors.

To top it off, 49,321 civil servants were removed from their positions, and the teaching licenses of 21,000 private school teachers were terminated. Nearly 1,600 university deans were to resign, and academics at Turkish universities were required to return home and refrain from traveling abroad. The replacement of these individuals with government loyalists will provide President Erdoğan direct control over numerous institutions.

The massive scale of the purge extends well beyond those who might have had connections to the coup plotters. It strains the imagination to suppose that tens of thousands of individuals from different walks of life secretly planned and executed a coup attempt. Under the facade of rooting out coup plotters, a colossal witchhunt has been authorized against President Erdoğan's opponents.

Having curtailed all checks and balances against his powers, Erdoğan will further consolidate control, promote with new vigor his agenda to create a presidency with sweeping executive powers, and authorize additional crackdowns to keep his opposition at bay.¹⁸

The trajectory of the regime change toward authoritarianism and effectively toward the one-man rule of Tayyip Erdoğan gained impetus in the aftermath of the coup, legitimizing the analogy of the Reichstag fire.

All in all, by 17 July 6,000 within the military had been either dismissed or detained. However, such action was not limited to the ranks of the armed forces. There also 18,000 detained or dismissed from the ranks of the police and judiciary. In what appeared to be a witch-hunt against not just Gülenist sympathizers, but perceived enemies of President Erdoğan and the AKP, the arrests and sackings kept coming. . . . By July 30, two weeks after the coup Turkey had cancelled the passports of 50,000 citizens in an attempt to prevent them leaving the country. . . . By the end of August, a total of over 60,000 had been detained, investigated or suspended, and plans formed to shake up country's intelligence agency.¹⁹

These figures kept rising. The waves of crackdowns gained permanence and became an integral part of governance. The coup attempt of July 15, 2016, was Turkey's Reichstag fire, indeed.

SEEKING LEGITIMACY: THE NEW TURKEY

For the proponents of Erdoğan's "New Turkey," the date of the coup is akin to October 29, 1923, the date of the foundation of Turkish Republic, the Kemalist "New Turkey" that replaced the defunct Ottoman Empire.

Entertaining the idea of an Ottoman revival, Erdoğan and his loyalists needed their own “New Turkey” to replace the Kemalist edifice and thus glorified the coup of July 15 accordingly. The official narrative depicted July 15 as an epic episode of Turkish history, a heroic defense of the people for democracy that cost the lives of around 250 people. The defense of democracy was used synonymously with loyalty and obedience to Tayyip Erdoğan. To inaugurate his “New Turkey,” Erdoğan—just like Atatürk more than ninety years ago—needed a similar legitimacy. Mustafa Kemal was the brilliant leader of the victorious liberation war waged against invading forces over large swaths of territory. The coup attempt on July 15, 2016, was, by any accounting, far from matching the national struggle of 1919–1922. Accusing those who challenge the official narrative regarding the coup with treason—jailing and convicting some of them on flimsy charges of having connections with the failed attempt—Erdoğan and his loyalists tried to establish a superficial legitimacy based on a self-claimed heroism.

Moreover, if July 15 were to serve as a foundation stone for Erdoğan’s “New Turkey,” it would need credentials similar to those grounding the national struggle of 1919–1922. First and foremost, it had to be waged against foreign forces, implying the Western world. In the aftermath of the botched coup, the arrows of indignation were directed toward the West. “The European Union has borne the brunt of accusations from Turkey’s new ruling elite. While the United States is widely believed to have stood behind the putschists on the night of the botched coup, the EU attracted outrage because of its perceived inaction and passivity.”²⁰ A month after the coup, Erdoğan’s spokesperson İbrahim Kalın, in an article for *Politico* entitled “Turkey: Brussels, You’ve Got a Problem,” wrote: “The failed coup attempt in Turkey marked a turning point not only for Turkish society but also for relations between the country and Brussels.”²¹

Alongside the uneasy relationship with Europe in the aftermath of the coup attempt, the relationship with Turkey’s main ally, the United States, took a different albeit also problematic turn. The catalyst was the Kurds. The military cooperation of the United States with the PYD/YPG, perceived by Turkey as the PKK’s offshoot in Syria, widened and deepened the chasms between Ankara and Washington. Turkey, after all, was Russia’s (and Iran’s) partner in Syria.

Three weeks after Erdoğan’s apology to Putin, the coup attempt on July 15 was thwarted with Russian support, and five weeks after the attempt, Turkish armed forces entered Syrian territory with Russia’s green light.

July 15, 2016, was a huge milestone, a big turning point for Erdoğan’s “New Turkey,” but did not replace the previous version, the “New Turkey” of the Kemalists. The Turkish “deep state” provided the link and the continuity between the two, as we will see later.

The Turkish deep state was born a century ago as the child of the Young Turks and their political organization *İttihad Terakki* (CUP, the Committee of Union and Progress). One hundred years later, its priority remains unchanged: confronting the Kurdish national aspirations.

NOTES

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Chapter 14

Deep State

The following lines caught my attention while reading an article about Donald Trump's political future in the United States in August 2018 in the *New York Review of Books*: "It is a widely recognized fact that the phrase 'deep state' originated in Turkey in the 1990s to describe the links between the government, the police and the criminal underworld."¹

The author found it necessary to remind his readers that the phrase "deep state" is Turkey's contribution to the lexicon of political science. While Germany can rightfully claim the copyright of the concepts of *realpolitik*, *weltanschauung*, and *lebensraum* that are added into English language as political expressions; similarly, a purely Turkish phrase "*derin devlet*," which literally can be translated as the "deep state" thus found a special place in the arsenal of the English language.

Among the new generation historians of the late Ottoman and early Republican Turkish periods, Ryan Gingeras has extensively worked, researched, wrote, and published regarding the deep state in Turkey. In his unique work entitled *Heroin, Organized Crime, & the Making of Modern Turkey*, he wrote: "In deciphering the current state of Turkish organized crime, many observers both inside and outside of Turkey have relied heavily upon a fairly new concept used to describe and interpret what many see as the historically clandestine and illicit nature of the country's governance . . . Turkey's so-called deep state (*derin devlet*)."²

In an earlier publication, an article entitled "Last Rites for a 'Pure Bandit': Clandestine Service, Historiography and the Origins of the Turkish 'Deep State,'" Gingeras had already presented his definition:

The deep state, or *derin devlet* in Turkish, is a paradigm rooted in a series of political scandals that rocked the Republic of Turkey. The concept of the deep

state . . . is a phrase that generally refers to a kind of shadow or parallel system of government in which unofficial or publicly unacknowledged individuals play important roles in defining and implementing state policy. Although military officers are often seen as ringleaders in administering the Turkish deep state, the participation of narcotic traffickers, paramilitaries, terrorists and other criminals is also deemed essential in constructing the deep state.³

As he accurately observed, the concept of the deep state entered into popular vernacular following the Susurluk scandal.⁴ According to Gingeras, “Of all the events that have come to epitomize the role of secret factions within Turkish history, the so-called Susurluk incident of 1996 stands as the clearest and most visceral case pointing to the enduring power of clandestine actors.”⁵ He added:

The case, which exposed the government’s recruitment of gangsters as hitmen to prosecute its dirty war against the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) . . . seemed to suggest that the elected government was merely a shell that masked the true identity of the country’s true rulers, a list which included elements of the military, the intelligence service, the mafia, and the business elite. The goal of this alliance, it was generally assumed, was simple: kill or discredit anyone who they believed threatened the integrity of Turkish state and nation.

Earlier on in this same essay, entitled “How the Deep State Came to America: A History,” Gingeras set the record straight in terms of its significance and background in Turkey:

It is a story that begins first in Turkey, where the term was first conceived. . . . Aspects of Turkish history, as well as cases elsewhere, suggest that such a phenomenon is not completely the product of a fantasy. . . . It is not possible to talk about developments of modern Turkey without considering its history of governmental conspiracies. . . . It is abundantly clear . . . that the Republic of Turkey was established by individuals who had helped form a veritable ‘state within a state’ during the later years of the Ottoman Empire. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the country’s founder, was counted among the seminal members of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), the political party that ruled the empire during its final decade. While the CUP upheld the façade of being an open party committed to parliamentary government and the rule of law, its members maintained a secret parallel system of control over the country. . . . The CUP era led to the development of a culture of conspiracy and subversion within the ranks of the Turkish state. The repeated military coups that wracked Turkey during the 20th century are often depicted as a legacy of the CUP’s dependence upon cabals within the Ottoman army to maintain its grip over the empire.⁶

In the rampant political assassinations and the extrajudicial killings that shaped the order in the second half of the 1990s, following the Susurluk incident, the deep state was considered the main culprit. The systemic lack of transparency in Turkey's governance fueled conspiracy theories, and for anything and everything that cannot find a rational explanation, the deep state became a code for interpretation and analysis. In 2007 when the Ergenekon investigation unfolded targeting mainly the alleged putschist army officers, the term "deep state" was used with even greater frequency. The accusation went that there had been a secularist military coup to unseat the government of the AKP, perceived as Islamist, in 2003 and the network organized for this task was called Ergenekon, named after a Turkic myth from ancient Central Asian times. Ergenekon and later in 2010 Balyoz (Sledgehammer), an alleged plot of the generals and admirals associated with the First Army stationed in Istanbul, were widely perceived as the deeds of the deep state.

Despite its frequent naming as "the usual suspect," the deep state has always been a controversial issue in the public debate and a taboo to effectively confront. Diligent academic research has unearthed many of its features, primarily the historic roots of the phenomenon that predated the foundation of the Republic and maintained continuity. Most often, it was almost impossible to discern the state from the deep state, which again has a lot to do with a deficit of democratic transparency.

THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE "DEEP STATE"

The quasi-consensus has it that the foundations of Turkey's current deep state lie in the late period of the Ottoman Empire marked by the rule of the secretive Committee of Union and Progress, founded in 1906, yet having roots going back to the 1880s and the origins of the Young Turk movement. The CUP gained power in the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, which in the following year dethroned Sultan Abdülhamid II who had reigned for 33 years. The CUP administration was responsible for entering World War I in alliance with Germany, and established its autocratic one-party rule under Talât Pasha, which eventually brought the demise of the Ottoman Empire. "One could pose that a 'deep state' existed at the end of the Ottoman Empire in part due to the profound anxieties felt by members of the CUP," wrote Ryan Gingeras.

As a party that emerged secretly for fear of state suppression, the CUP continued to maintain its furtive roots after the revolution of 1908 out of fear of losing power. Much of party's activities and deliberations were kept secret because of distrust for the public at large. With the commencement of what they saw as a

life and death struggle in 1914, the CUP opted to utilize clandestine, brutal, and extralegal means in the hopes of eliminating all potential threats to the empire's survival.⁷

One of the most brilliant historians of Turkey, Edhem Eldem, a scion of the Ottoman royal family, gave credit to Sultan Abdülhamid II as the founder of the deep state. For Eldem,

Abdülhamid's contribution to authoritarianism cannot be underestimated. By creating his autocratic regime as an alternative, not only to constitutionalism, but also to the bureaucratic and legalist tradition of the Tanzimat, he paved the way to a form of modern personal rule that would eventually play a crucial role in late Ottoman and Turkish politics. He can thus be credited for the invention of what is today called the "deep state" in Turkish politics, in reference to the fact that beyond any form of legal and representative governance, there is—and according to some, there should be—room for an unaccountable and uncontrolled "core" that will guarantee the survival of the state. In that sense, while there is no doubt that the ideological foundations of modern Turkey were established by the Young Turks and Unionists after the 1908 Revolution, as once argued by Erik-Jan Zürcher, it seems that Abdülhamid can be credited with the paternity of the structure of the modern Turkish state, including its darkest components.⁸

Eldem with an emphasis on Hamidian autocracy establishes a rational bridge that extends to the contemporary Turkish deep state. However, although the reference to that period is accurate, the institutional connection of the contemporary deep state lies with the Unionists who ended Abdülhamid's 33-year-old reign.

SPECIAL ORGANIZATION FOR "DIRTY JOBS"

While the roots of Turkey's deep state may be discovered in the era of Abdülhamid II, which was marked by a repressive police apparatus and autocratic rule, the later period of the Ottoman history under the rule of the CUP is more revealing to identify its continuity in an institutional sense. That period leads us to the Special Organization, *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa* in Turkish. The deep state or *derin devlet* in the current parlance actually connotes nothing but *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa* during the last decade of the Ottoman Empire under the rule of the CUP. The state at that time had a dual character, the "deep" side of which had links to the criminal underworld and was tasked with such "dirty jobs" as would be impossible without resorting to extrajudicial means.

The *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa* manifested its efficiency especially during the campaign of uprooting the Christian population, mainly the Armenians, from Eastern Anatolia in 1915. Sufficient documents reveal the exclusive role of the Special Organization in the extermination of the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire.

For Ryan Gingeras, The Special Organization is critical in understanding both the paranoia of the Young Turks' state and the role played by criminal bands in maintaining that state. . . . Its clandestine nature allowed for military officers, bureaucrats, landowners, intellectuals, and paramilitary leaders to meet and function in unison without public and private oversight . . . it was hoped [the Special Organization] could succeed in crushing centers of opposition in areas where elements of regular administration and military had previously failed.

In historical terms, the Special Organization serves an important precedent in the making of modern Turkey. While it is not clear if the Turkish bureaucracy or military continued to retain any specific institutional memory of the Special Organization, many of the conditions that prompted the CUP state to form a secret paramilitary arm can be found in Turkey during the latter decades of the twentieth century.⁹

The Special Organization was the brainchild of Enver Pasha, who was the hero of the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 and one of the three most influential leaders of the CUP as well as the Minister of War for the Ottoman government during the Great War. He is widely held responsible for pushing the Ottoman Empire into the war in alliance with Germany. Gingeras wrote:

As a clandestine organ loyal to Enver Pasha, it fell beyond the oversight (and even the knowledge) of the Ottoman parliament. Even the Special Organization's budget, in part financed by the German government, was kept secret from the state bureaucracy and the parliament. Wartime British and Russian sources did suspect the existence of a clandestine wing of the Ottoman military, but lacked hard information regarding all its activities.¹⁰

Although November 17, 1913, is declared as the official birth of the Special Organization, it is known to have existed during the First Balkan War in 1912; under Enver Pasha's instructions, in order to keep the largely Muslim provinces of Western Thrace, Gümülcine and Dedeağaç (Komotini and Alexandropolis in today's Greece), elements of the Special Organization covertly infiltrated the territory and declared "the Islamic Republic of Thrace." This was not only an attempt to push the Greeks out but also to thwart Bulgarian aspirations in the region. Here, it is noteworthy to recognize

how the nationalist objectives were defined synonymously with the religious identity. This is a very crucial clue in understanding the symbiotic relationship between nationalism and Islamism that simultaneously serve as the pillars of Tayyip Erdoğan's "New Turkey" almost a hundred years later.

The same Unionist officials who took part forming an "Islamic Republic" in Western Thrace "would form the nucleus of a much larger and more ambitious clandestine service established at the outbreak of the First World War,"¹¹ according to the subsequent sources quoted by Ryan Gingeras.

The Special Organization, with an estimated number of 30,000 men at the height of World War I, turned into a formidable intelligence body and a strong and secret component of the state to carry out dirty jobs for which the government did not care to take on responsibility.

The suppression and liquidation of suspected centres of separatism in Anatolia also fell under the Special Organization's mandate. In a joint operation encompassing various departments attached to the Ottoman Interior Ministry, as well as branches of the military, clandestine squads raised by Special Organization officers secretly executed an untold number of Armenian, Greek and other Christian civilians suspected of treason.¹²

The archives of the Special Organization were destroyed soon after 1918, at the end of the Great War. However, its manpower remained intact and was transformed into a new clandestine service, which acted as the central support network for the National Forces (*Kuva-yı Milliye*) under Mustafa Kemal that led the national struggle against the invading Greek army in Western Anatolia and the British and French occupations in İstanbul and southeastern Turkey.

In the wake of the foundation of the Republic in 1923, the Special Organization metamorphosed into intelligence and security networks of the Turkish state with different names. Whichever forms it has assumed over time, it has always been regarded as the institutional founding stone of Turkey's current deep state.

PRECURSOR OF THE "DEEP STATE," PREDECESSOR OF MİT

For Turkey's official National Intelligence Organization (MİT), the Special Organization and its heirs were the forerunners during and after the national struggle of 1919–1922 after which the Republic of Turkey was founded. It is noteworthy that MİT considers Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa to be the precursor of Turkey's deep state, and as part of its own institutional history, even its

predecessor. The following is the first paragraph of its official history as published on MİT's official website:

In Turkey, efforts to create an intelligence organization capable of functioning in a systematic and organized manner date back to the final years of the Ottoman Empire. In an effort to maintain the Empire's territorial integrity, prevent separatist activities and monitor the actions of foreign governments in the Middle East and elsewhere, the Special Organization (Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa) was established on 17 November 1913 by Enver Pasha. Having carried out military and paramilitary activities during World War I, the organization was dissolved upon the conclusion of the Armistice of Mudros on 30 October 1918.¹³

The peculiar nature of Turkey's deep state is that it is related to the MİT, an official but a clandestine institution itself, and to the military. The latter has an ideological and institutional memory that connects it with the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, and therefore with the CUP and the Special Organization. All these complexities were addressed in a convincing analysis in 2009 entitled "Turkey's 'Deep State' and the Ergenekon Conundrum."¹⁴

Akın Ünver, a Turkish academic, emphasized in his policy brief that the exclusive role of the military in Turkish politics and its direct or indirect involvement in the political process dates to the military-backed revolution of 1908. The military's self-imposed role as the perpetual guarantor of secularism in Turkey extends back to the very foundation of the Republic in 1923. During the first decade of the 1900s, the Committee of Union and Progress was founded in Salonica, Macedonia by a group of people with origins in the Young Turks Movement and soon after its foundation the membership of the CUP was mainly dominated by young officers of the Ottoman army including the future founder of the Republic of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk). Clandestine political activity spearheaded by the military elements of the CUP led to the 1908 Revolution, and ever since then the military has actively been involved in Turkey's political life, and controlled many of its institutions, above all the security establishment and therefore MİT. "At the time of the revolution, the CUP had about 2,000 members, of whom about two-thirds or more seem to have been military men."¹⁵

Referring to this historical record, Ünver draws attention to the following fact:

Through most of the post-1968 era, the MİT took much flak from Turkish liberals for wittingly or unwittingly providing cover for the deep-state networks that 'secretly organize street violence' and 'create an environment that would legitimize a military coup.' Although MİT had repeatedly denied any such claims, more recent scholarship points to the existence of deep-state branches

within the organization that were elusive even to its own director as well as the Commander of the Armed Forces. Critical scholarship, as well as the former President of Turkey, Süleyman Demirel, pointed to a particular unit within MİT, *Özel Harp Dairesi* [Office of Special Operations] as the connection between the organization and the deep-state networks. Several such networks that benefit from the cover of the state, and yet conduct operations that harm Turkish citizens, were spotted by officials and scholars at various times since the 1960s. Among the best known and most widely criticized of these branches is the Counter-guerrilla Branch, which was established as the military wing of the Turkish arm of NATO's stay-behind operations. It is mostly criticized for organizing street violence and creating an environment justifying a military takeover. There are also more recently-developed organizations that may be considered to be the evolved versions of the old Counter-guerrilla Branch in the 1990s: Gendarmerie Intelligence and Counterterrorism (JİTEM)—which was operational mostly in the southeastern regions of Turkey, taking an active role in the fight against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and was criticized for adopting extreme methods such as mystery killings, assassinations, excessive use of force, and torture, and *Özel Harekat Timleri* (Special Operations Units)—also active in the fight against the PKK, and accused of undertaking similar methods to those of JİTEM.¹⁶

Like the tentacles of the octopus, the active mechanisms of the deep state were run by different branches of the security establishment, ranging from the military and intelligence organization to the “specialized” branches of the police and gendarmerie. They concomitantly form the security apparatus of the state itself.

THE MILITARY AS THE “DEEP STATE”

As may be discerned, the offspring of the Special Organization, which was particularly notorious for its role in the genocidal campaign against the Armenians in 1915, have more recently taken different forms and used names such as Office of Special Operations, Special Operations Units, and JİTEM (Gendarmerie Intelligence and Counterterrorism), all of which functioned to suppress the Kurds in the 1990s and 2000s within the broader framework of the military establishment.

The veteran Turkish statesman and ninth president Süleyman Demirel (1924–2015), who assumed the portfolio of the prime minister five times in his long political career and was ousted twice by the military, was in the best position to assess the nature of the deep state and its relation with the military. Speaking in 2005, Süleyman Demirel identified the deep state in

the following way: “The deep state is the military. The deep state is the state itself. They are not a state but in the times when the state was seized they became the deep state. . . . Those who are inside of the deep state are, in normal times, certain authorities who want to become saviors.”¹⁷

Capitalizing on Demirel’s remarks, historian Gingeras referred to the statement of the leader of the military coup of September 12, 1980, General Kenan Evren, who later became the seventh president of the republic, when he wrote: “As cryptic as Demirel’s explanation appears, Kenan Evren, when asked about the former prime minister’s comments, agreed with the contention that the deep state and the military can be one and the same.”¹⁸

Himself having a rather uneasy relationship with the military establishment, Erdoğan, too, has given credence to the existence of the deep state. Speaking on television in January 2007, he expressed his conviction that “deep” state has always existed in Turkey as a political force, as a phenomenon carried over from the Ottoman times.

ERGENEKON: GRANDCHILD OF THE SPECIAL ORGANIZATION

In light of all this, the mental atmosphere was certainly in place to see the Ergenekon¹⁹ case that commenced in 2007 as the struggle of the Erdoğan rule against the deep state. Tayyip Erdoğan, defying the critics of the then-ongoing Ergenekon case, declared in April 2008 that he was “the prosecutor of the Ergenekon case.”

The “Ergenekon process” concerned hundreds of individuals including generals in the high echelons of the military, retired army personnel of different ranks, politicians, civil servants, and media representatives. The name “Ergenekon” refers to an early Turkic legend from Central Asia about the salvation of the Turks from extinction, so they could survive and reproduce as an ethnic community. It later became a centerpiece for Turkish ultra-nationalist narrative. The name was attributed, in the police investigation, to an alleged clandestine network that was charged to instigate a military coup to overthrow the ruling AKP following its electoral victory in 2002. The court referred the accused under trial as “the alleged terrorist organization.” In the aftermath of the collapse of the Islamist partnership between the ruling AKP and the Gülenists, the Ergenekon case was interpreted as the plot of the latter against the military. All the allegations concerning the Ergenekon were claimed as baseless and the evidence as fake. However, from 2007 on, there was also a broad perception in Turkey that took the Ergenekon investigation to be the quintessential confirmation of the existence of the deep state. Historian Gingeras underlined:

Generals, policemen, nationalists, activists, journalists, television presenters, professors, lawyers, civil servants, spies, businessmen, entertainers, and, of course, gangsters have each been identified as playing major and minor roles in creating and perpetuating the Ergenekon organization. Regardless of how exactly one defines the contours of the deep state, the implications of its supposed existence are crystal clear: shadowy figures and factions, some without any official recognition or standing, have been the true arbiters of power in Turkey.²⁰

Ünver had already brought into the public attention that “The alleged ‘Ergenekon’ network has been indicted on the grounds that it acted as the hub of information between the state, deep-state branches, the Counter-guerrilla Branch, and the mafia.”²¹

The Kurdish political circles, because of the first-hand experience their constituency had had with JİTEM and Special Operations Forces, were very vigilant regarding the Ergenekon investigation. Moreover, since a firm anti-Kurdish stance was common among the diverse elements of the Ergenekon, the pro-Kurdish DTP (Democratic Society Party) made an analogy between the Ergenekon and the Special Organization of the CUP era in the late Ottoman-Turkish period. The DTP, as the predecessor to the BDP and HDP, declared in 2008 that the Ergenekon is “the direct successor of the Ottoman Special Organization (Teşkilat-Mahsusa), which used state-sponsored assassins and carried out many deliberate acts of mass violence—most specifically against the Armenians during the early 20th century.”²²

Born in the last days of the Ottoman State and mainly operated by military officials, the deep state had survived into the twenty-first century: from the Special Organization of the CUP during the early twentieth century to the Ergenekon network almost a hundred years later.

The theoretical perception of the deep state, its connection to the “state,” and its continuity through different eras is outlined in the following brilliant observation by Gingeras:

There is a general temptation to see essential or monolithic deep states firmly embedded within the late Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey. Rather than analyze the social, economic, or political reasons for factionalism, violence, and secrecy found within policies undertaken by Ankara or Istanbul, many attempts to isolate and identify the deep state as an enduring pattern or tradition of specific conspiratorial cabals. No particular facet of the Turkish state, overtly or covertly, has ever held absolute sway over the management of the country. Governance in Turkey, from its conception as a state, was hotly contested both at its center and its margins. Throughout Turkey’s history (including the reign of the Ottomans), the parties and individuals involved in

challenging and shaping the state's development have evolved considerably. If one had to pinpoint one element of continuity connecting the various regimes of spanning the years between Enver, Atatürk, and Erdoğan, it is clear that the politics of national security have had a consistent bearing on who has assumed positions of power and how state policy has been acted upon public and behind closed doors.²³

THE ISLAMIST CIVIL WAR AND ERDOĞAN'S "FAUSTIAN PACT"

The most striking example to confirm the observation above was the *volte-face* of Erdoğan after his partnership with Gülenists was replaced by a lethal power struggle that had come into the open by the end of the year 2013. The overt power struggle between the two was, in effect, nothing other than an Islamist civil war for control over the state. Erdoğan needed the alliance of the disgraced military in whose defamation he had played a major role. Such an alliance was vital against the "enemy within"—the Gülenists, his erstwhile cherished partners. Eventually, Erdoğan won the "Islamist civil war"; but the victory achieved did not occur due to favor of one Islamist faction over the other. The new allies with which Erdoğan sought to join forces against the Gülen network devoured *the Islamists in need*. Progressively, *Erdoğan the nationalist* gained preponderance over *Erdoğan the Islamist*, without the latter being abandoned altogether. In Turkey's peculiarity, nationalism and Islamism had never been mutually exclusive. They either complemented each other or were concentric and intimately related.

Awareness of the dramatic change in Erdoğan's allies and adversaries, and the irrevocable impact of the change on Turkey's future, was rare among Turkey's notable political analysts. The term "Faustian pact" was first used to describe his newfound alliance with the former Ergenekon culprits in an op-ed piece of mine in the daily *Radikal*. The op-ed piece, which was published two-and-a-half years before the coup on July 15, 2016, was entitled "Is There Still a Possibility for a Military Coup in Turkey?" and my assessment was positive.

Certain excerpts from the op-ed piece are of particular interest when looked at in retrospect:

From the day that his rule was stained indelibly, the performance of Tayyip Erdoğan brings into mind that he concluded a "Faustian pact" with the military. The greatest gain of the reign of Tayyip Erdoğan was pushing back the military tutelage. The Ergenekon case had symbolized that. Now, all the convicts of that case and with them the culprits of Turkey's darkest political murder cases

are released as if they are acquitted. It is true that a lot of injustice was done in the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer (Balyoz) trials. It is also true that multifold innocent people rather than the guilty are punished. Restoring justice was an absolute necessity. However, unfortunately, what is done is not what meets that requirement. What really is done wounded the public conscience even more. It is the formation of a new alliance in order to suppress the investigation of corruption and to cover it. . . . From now on, the answer to the question, whether there is still a possibility of a military coup in Turkey is short and simple: Yes. There is.²⁴

The pact that Erdoğan had made with the ultra-nationalist rogue elements of the military was confirmed in the following quotation cited in a *New York Times* piece by Sabrina Tavernese. It was only about one week after Erdoğan's public apology to Vladimir Putin, and two weeks before the coup attempt: "‘Erdoğan today has been captured by the patriotic forces of Turkey,’ said Dogu Perincek, the head of a nationalist party close to the military, who was jailed for conspiring against the state but recently released."²⁵ Doğu Perinçek was one of the leading political representatives of these rogue elements in the military, and his blunt statement was widely interpreted as Erdoğan's capitulation to the ultra-nationalists.

REINFORCING THE "DEEP STATE" AGAINST THE KURDS

That was a "Faustian pact" in evolution, and its gradual formation was most clearly illustrated in Erdoğan's terminating the Kurdish peace process and adopting harsh measures against the Kurds. For the military and the ultra-nationalist deep state networks, the Kurdish issue had always been a primary national security matter to be dealt with by force, not by political compromise.

Whether compelled by the collapse of his partnership and the acute power struggle with Fethullah Gülen, and the eventual rapprochement with the deep state, or lured by his ever-growing control over the deep state did not alter the fact: the politics of national security had a bearing on Tayyip Erdoğan, too. Consequently, the nationalist configuration of power that was established in the fall of 2015 opted once again for the war against the Kurds—or suppressing their nationalist aspirations at the least.

The most significant turning point in this respect was the failed coup (or the coup that was designed to fail). After July 15, 2016, the weak institutions of the Turkish state further weakened or were emptied out while the deep state grew stronger and was consolidated.

Eventually, the transition to Tayyip Erdoğan's "New Turkey" accelerated. It indeed looked like a rupture in some ways from its Kemalist predecessor, but as we will see in the next chapters, it also was a continuation in the sense of its basic ethno-nationalist and Muslim-nationalist autocratic nature.

NOTES

1. Michael Tomasky, *New York Review of Books* 65, no. 13 (Summer 2018, August 16 – September 26), 4.

2. Ryan Gingeras, *Heroin, Organized Crime, & the Making of Modern Turkey* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 243.

3. Ryan Gingeras, "Last Rites for a 'Pure Bandit': Clandestine Service, Historiography and the Origins of the Turkish 'Deep State,'" *Past & Present* 206, no. 1 (February 2010): 152–54.

4. On 4 November 1996, a Mercedes car hit a truck in the small town of Susurluk which is approximately 270 km south of İstanbul. Three passengers who died and one seriously injured revealed the illicit links within the Turkish state. Among the dead, one was a high-security official, another was a well-known ultra-nationalist drug trafficker, who was also a fugitive, and third was his mistress. The fourth was a member of parliament from the ruling party, who is also a Kurdish tribal chief. With what used to be called in Turkey the "Susurluk scandal," the working relationship between these elements that aimed to liquidate the Kurdish insurgents, activists, and Turkish leftist dissidents was also revealed.

5. Ryan Gingeras, "How the Deep State Came to America: A History," *War on the Rocks* (February 4, 2019), <https://warontherocks.com/2019/how-the-deep-state-came-to-america>.

6. Ibid.

7. Gingeras, *Heroin, Organized Crime, & the Making of Modern Turkey*, 41.

8. Edhem Eldem, "Sultan Abdülhamid II: Founding Father of the Turkish State," *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2018): 44.

9. Gingeras, op.cit., 41.

10. Gingeras, "Last Rites for a 'Pure Bandit,'" 160.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 160–61.

13. National Intelligence Organization, <http://www.mit.gov.tr/english/tarihce.html>.

14. H. Akın Ünver, "'Deep State' and the Ergenekon Conundrum," *Middle East Institute Policy Brief* no. 23 (April 1, 2009), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkeys-deep-state-and-ergenekon-conundrum>.

15. Zürcher, *The Young Turk Legacy and Nation Building*, 101b.

16. Ünver, "'Deep State' and the Ergenekon Conundrum."

17. Belma Akçura, *Derin Devlet Oldu Devlet* [Deep state became the state itself] (İstanbul: Güncel Yayıncılık, 2006), 16.

18. Gingeras, *Heroin*, 244. Gingeras quoted Merve Kavakci, “Turkey’s Test with Its Deep State,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 90. Merve Kavakçı was the first headscarved member of parliament, elected in 1999 from the Islamist Welfare Party to which also Tayyip Erdoğan belonged. When her oath-taking as an MP caused a row in the parliament, then Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit prevented her from assuming her post alleging that her participation with a headscarf would be a violation of Turkey’s foundational principle of secularism. Ms. Kavakçı left Turkey, lived in the United States and lost her Turkish citizenship. Following the formation of an AKP government in 2002, her citizenship was reinstated and in 2018 appointed as the Ambassador to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

19. The name given to an alleged clandestine ultra-nationalist secularist organization. The convicted alleged members were released in 2014, and the case ended with the acquittal of all that had been trialed in 2018. During the course, much fake evidence used against the accused were revealed leading to dub the whole case as sham. The Gülenists embedded in the judiciary and security were blamed, for plotting against the military through the Ergenekon case.

20. Gingeras, *Heroin, Organized Crime, & the Making of Modern Turkey*, 244.

21. Ünver, “‘Deep State’ and the Ergenekon Conundrum.”

22. Reported in *Today’s Zaman* on 26 March 2008. The entire archive of *Today’s Zaman*, an English-language Gülenist mouthpiece, was destroyed by the Turkish authorities following the failed coup attempt on 15 July 2016, blamed on Fethullah Gülen and his followers in the military.

23. Gingeras, *Heroin, Organized Crime, & the Making of Modern Turkey*, 245.

24. Cengiz Çandar, “Türkiye’de hâlâ askeri darbe ihtimali var mı?” [Is there still a possibility of a military coup in Turkey?] *Radikal*, March 14, 2014.

25. Sabrina Tavernese, “Turkish Leader Erdogan Making New Enemies and Frustrating Old Friends,” *New York Times*, July 4, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/05/world/turkey-erdogan-...html?emc=edit_th_20160705&nl=todaysheadlines&nid=4784720&r=0.

Chapter 15

The Pedigree of Turkish Autocracy

Whether the roots of Turkish deep state lie in the last period of the Empire under the rule of the Committee of the Union and Progress, or extend to an even earlier period, the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the history certainly reflects a trajectory of autocracy from Abdülhamid II to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who is allegedly aspiring to be the reincarnation of the former during the first quarter of the twenty-first century.

THE TALE OF THREE TITANS

Deep state has always constituted the mainstay of autocratic rule in Turkey. It is not by coincidence that the most prolonged periods of governance in modern Turkish history have been autocratic, marked by the names of Abdülhamid II, Atatürk, and Erdoğan. If the assertion of English historian A. J. P. Taylor (1906–1990) is adopted that the history of modern Europe can be written in terms of three titans, Napoleon, Bismarck, and Lenin, the history of the last 150 years of Turkey can be written as the tales of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1842–1918), Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (b. 1954). These three autocrats each in his own right can accurately be described as a titan, and this perspective may help us better understand this period of Turkish history in all its richness and vicissitude. It is equally helpful in explaining the power configuration in the fateful years of the 2010s. The record of success of the three titans in monopolizing power through acute struggles, and their obsession with a centralized state, have inevitably steered Turkey, both in its Ottoman and its Republican incarnations, toward autocratic regimes.

The last of the titans, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, took the first, Sultan Abdülhamid, as his role model. Erdoğan's autocracy was actually a coalition between himself as the ideological heir to Abdülhamid II, and the offspring of the Unionists, Kemalists included—which, it will be recalled, actually dethroned the former. At first glance, this is hard to understand, because the Kemalists with their secularist zeal and strong anti-Islam undertones seemingly constitute an odd link. However, the history of modern Turkey should be seen through the lens of continuity from Abdülhamid II to the Unionists, and from Atatürk to Erdoğan. Erdoğan's rule, after all, combines Abdülhamid's legacy with that of his enemies. The Kemalists were members of the big family of the Unionists despite the differences between them and the old Unionist leadership.

Replacing the orthodox official historiography of Turkey with the revisionist one may help understand Turkey better. Many scholars in the second half of the twentieth century, like Bernard Lewis with his classic *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (1968) and Stanford Shaw who climbed to prominence with *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, advocated the premise that Mustafa Kemal's declaration of the Turkish Republic in 1923 was a revolutionary political, economic, and social break for Anatolia (Asia Minor), salvaging territory of the Ottoman Empire from foreign occupation and rule.

The more recent generations of scholars, pioneered by Erik J. Zürcher with his monumental book *Turkey, A Modern History*, challenged that premise and developed a revisionist outlook for modern Turkish history. They suggest a new periodization for Turkish history. While not underestimating the importance of the date 1923, they do not see it as the absolute turning point. Instead they see 1908, the year of the outbreak of Young Turk Revolution, as the beginning of the process that led to the declaration of the republic. Following in Zürcher's footsteps, Ryan Gingeras writes,

Erik Jan Zürcher's many contributions to the study of the Young Turk regime suggest that we should see continuities between the final Ottoman regime and the governing Kemalist elite in terms not only of personnel but also in terms of policy. In the years between 1908 and 1938, a coherent (but ever-dwindling) cohort of officers, intellectuals, and administrators set out to radically transform Anatolian politics and society with increasing intensity and ruthlessness.¹

Erik J. Zürcher refers to the “three manifestations of the Young Turk movement” as “the Committee of Union and Progress before 1918, the leadership of the ‘National Struggle’ (Millî Mücadele) between 1918 and 1922, and the early republican leadership (up to 1945).” His detailed research involves the geographic origins, family background, age, education, and early careers of

the Young Turks, revealing that the membership of the CUP, the leadership of the National Struggle, and the early republican leadership overlapped.

“The Constitutional revolution of 1908 and the proclamation of the republic in 1923 were very much the work of a single group. . . . There is a common profile to this group of important Young Turks.”²

In other words, “nearly all the Kemalists, who succeeded the Unionists after World War I and went out to found the secular republic of Turkey, had been members of the CUP.”³

Mustafa Kemal, who himself was a Unionist, took over the movement, successfully beat off the attempts by the former Unionists to regain control (in 1921) or make political comeback (in 1923), and between 1925 and 1926, established full control by eliminating all the former Unionists and resistance leaders who could provide a credible challenge to his leadership.

Zürcher unequivocally illustrates the continuity in the period between 1908 and 1945:

The three elements that together made up the core of the national resistance movement were military officers with a Unionist background, activists with a background in the Special Organization, and CUP party bosses and organizers in the provincial centres. The leadership of the early republic reflected these three ingredients, with a dominant position for (former) military men. Having been Unionists themselves, they shared the basic characteristics possessed by the top-level of the pre-1918 Unionists leadership.⁴

His contribution to the modern history of Turkey goes unrivaled. It was Zürcher who suggested that periodization between 1908 and 1945 would facilitate understanding of the modern Turkish history, against many who preferred the year 1923 as the radical rupture from the long imperial centuries. Thus, Zürcher changed the entire outlook on Turkish historiography, establishing a strong relationship and continuity between the precursors of the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 and the founders of Republican Turkey.

POWER STRUGGLE IN THE 1920S AND 2010S

The 1920s or the early republican period of Turkish history witnessed an acute power struggle among the different Unionist groups and individuals. What Turkey passed through in the 2010s, despite natural differences, is like a replica of the 1920s. The power struggle during the 2010s of Erdoğan and his circle on the one hand, and Fethullah Gülen and his followers on the other, was to some extent the 1920s revisited. In this respect, the election results of June 2015 that catapulted the pro-Kurdish HDP as a major political force of

Turkey can be likened to the Kurdish rebellion of 1925. Their roles in shaping the nature of Turkey's regime in the aftermath were similar. Also, the alleged coup attempt in July 2016 to overthrow Erdoğan played the same role as the alleged İzmir conspiracy against Mustafa Kemal in 1926.

Erik J. Zürcher's MA thesis was on the İzmir conspiracy and the subsequent political trials. In the preface of *The Young Turk Legacy*, he underlined the significance of the 1926 conspiracy, laying very valuable groundwork for the analogy regarding the failed coup of 2016:

There was something very strange about the way the conspiracy and the trials of 1926 depicted in Turkish and Western historiography . . . why there was a need. . . to purge the remaining leaders of the former regime as well as most of Mustafa Kemal's co-leaders of the national independence movement . . . if the Kemalists had already successfully supplanted them?

My conclusion was that the trials were political purges and that . . . the 1926 trials were a way for one group of former Unionists (that around Kemal) to ward off the challenges from within of other former Unionists who could contest Kemal's leadership because like him, they had a credible claim on the loyalty of the political élite.⁵

Observers of the developments following the failed coup attempt of July 2016 saw that tens of thousands of civil servants who were previously considered as allies of Erdoğan were placed behind bars in ruthless crackdowns. Through the sham trials that have been conducted thousands of them were convicted, suggesting tangible parallelism in contemporary Turkish history.

REVISITING ABDÜLHAMID

Both Mustafa Kemal and his twelfth successor in the seat of Turkish presidency, Tayyip Erdoğan, proved to be extremely shrewd politicians excelling in the game of power, outdoing their rivals, competitors, and potential opponents. To rise high in the power struggle and monopolize it was also a striking talent of Sultan Abdülhamid II, which perhaps explains the longevity of his rule in an epoch of turbulence and turmoil, as posited in the best written scholarly biography of Abdülhamid, by French historian François Georgeon.⁶

Abdülhamid ascended to the throne in 1876 following a series of palace intrigues that witnessed the suicide of his uncle Sultan Abdülaziz, who was replaced by Abdülhamid's elder brother Murad. It was widely speculated that Abdülaziz's death was the result of an assassination rather than a suicide, as relayed by official historiography. Abdülhamid's brother, Murad V, was

deposed on allegations that his mental condition would not permit his reign. Although Abdülhamid II, who had led a secluded life behind the thick and high walls of the palace, was an unexpected choice for the throne, his reign was supported by the reformist and relatively liberal bureaucratic elite of the Empire. Abdülhamid proclaimed the first Constitution of the Ottoman centuries (*Kanun-u Esasi*), thereby fulfilling the wishes of those circles that supported his rule. It was with his enthroning in 1876 that the period of the Constitutional Monarchy begun in the Ottoman Empire. In the following year, the fateful Ottoman-Russian war (1877–1878) broke out, and enemy forces advanced to the outskirts of İstanbul. The survival of the Empire, albeit with significant territorial losses in the Balkans and the Caucasus, was maintained in the Berlin Conference of 1878, thanks to the intervention of the British Empire. Abdülhamid, with regard to the extraordinary circumstances confronting the Empire, abrogated the Constitution, dismissed the Parliament (Chamber of Deputies, *Meclis-i Mebusan*), and gradually drifted into a personal autocratic rule under his iron grip. To that end, he liquidated all those in his inner circle who had helped him to power, including his brother-in-law Mahmud Celaleddin Pasha. Mainly having a Western European outlook, the prominent liberal-minded men of literature, from Namık Kemal to Ziya Pasha, attracted the wrath of the Sultan and ended in jail or exile. Most importantly, Midhat Pasha, the great statesman who left an ineradicable mark on many reforms, was purged: first jailed, then sent to exile to Taif on the Arabian Peninsula, where he would be strangled to death by the Sultan's henchmen. Abdülhamid II thus established his personal power beginning in the year 1878 and proved to be the great master of international politics—until his removal by the Young Turks (the Unionists) more than three decades later, in 1909.⁷

PREDICAMENT IN HISTORY: ERDOĞAN AND ATATÜRK

It is open to debate whether the inclination in modern Turkish history toward one-man rule and thus to autocracy has been the imperative of particular international and domestic conditions and therefore inevitable, or the result of choices on the part of exceptionally brilliant and successful political leaders. Madeleine Albright, former US Secretary of State (1997–2001), who has a record of engagement with Tayyip Erdoğan, reached the conclusion that while Erdoğan could have opted to act differently, he chose the road leading to tyranny. What follows is her observation under the sarcastic subtitle “Erdoğan the Magnificent”:

No Turkish leader has succeeded in building—or even really tried to build—a democratic society in which citizens who have far different visions of what it means to be Turkish can nevertheless live together productively, freely, and in peace. That would be a worthy monument to any statesman. Might Erdoğan choose that path? I think he could, but only if he were to accept that the primary obstacle to advancement is neither the Gülenists, nor the terrorists, nor rival political parties—it is the voice inside telling him that he and only he knows what's best for Turkey. That's the siren's song that transforms power into an end in itself—and leads toward tyranny.⁸

The trajectory between Abdülhamid's power struggle in the nineteenth century, that of Mustafa Kemal in the twentieth century, and Tayyip Erdoğan in the twenty-first century, is a fascinating story for the discipline of political science and a constant source of debate for historians.

Lord Kinross (1904–1976), the author of Atatürk's biography (1965), which for decades has been considered as the best work in the field and even semi-officially endorsed, offers a noteworthy insight on the matter:

Paradoxically Kemal had become a dictator not in order to obtain power but after he had done so already. In the early days he had had to work democratically—if only because his prestige was not yet sufficiently established to enable him to do otherwise. As a result he had won a resounding victory against the foreigner and had secured an honorable peace, which for the first time admitted Turkey in the family of respected Western nations; he had eliminated the old concept of Sultanate and Caliphate with their well-entrenched political power, and had swept away the institutions of an obsolete medieval society. The main foundations of a new Turkey were now complete—and their last stages had been completed against scant opposition.

This might well have been the moment for an experiment in some kind of liberal democracy, whose principles were after all inherent in the new Turkish republic. This would have been a fitting culmination to that movement of reform which had been born in Ottoman Empire a century earlier. The Young Turks, giving it a new brief lease of life, had lapsed from parliamentary democracy into a dictatorial triumvirate at a time of crisis when the foreigner was threatening the empire from every side, and when a parliamentary Opposition had shown signs of endangering the unity of the country. But Kemal had surmounted these very obstacles; he had no need for a dictatorship—for the duumvirate which, with Ismet as his reliable factotum, he had now set up. Extraordinary measures might have been necessary to deal with such local outbursts as the Kurdish rebellion and the subsequent hat riots. But there was no need to extend these over the whole country, and above all no need to use them for the suppression of the parliamentary Opposition of an essentially moderate kind.

But he had decided otherwise. His decision was firstly a matter of temperament. By nature and training, a soldier, he might delegate his authority but he could not tolerate the idea of any threat to it; he might plan his campaigns in cooperation with other but he must have sole control of their execution.⁹

M. Philips Price, another British historian of lesser degree compared to Lord Kinross and a contemporary of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, known for his sympathetic views on the Soviet Russian leader V. I. Lenin, offered an assessment on Mustafa Kemal's monopoly of power. Though sounding quite simplistic, it carries some common features with those of Lord Kinross and Erik J. Zürcher:

There comes a time in most revolutions when the leader or leaders of one trend of thought have to become ruthless if they are going to succeed and coerce the other trend of thought. . . . Turkey must break with her past or she would go down in chaos. Her history and the structure of her society at that period of her history permitted no prolonged period of evolution. The break must be made at once. That was how Mustafa Kemal saw it. But if this was to be done, all opponents would have to be ruthlessly removed. Mustafa Kemal decided to act. He had the Statute of Law and Order and the dictatorial powers that went with it. He became tyrannical, for he saw no other way out.¹⁰

Price refers to the Izmir conspiracy and the subsequent tribunals as milestone developments for Mustafa Kemal's consolidation of power and the untested and inevitable establishment of an authoritarian and quasi-dictatorial regime:

Cases were framed up against all the opponents that he could lay his hands on. Rauf Bey and Halide Edib had escaped, but others, especially Djavid Bey, the able Young Turk leader of former time, was caught and tried. The prisoners were bullied. The trial became farcical. History was dragged in, and responsibility for defeat in the First World War was held as evidence of guilt. Sentences were passed. Military commanders were reprieved and let off with a warning, but some civilians paid the extreme penalty. Djavid Bey and half a dozen other leaders were hanged in the public square in Ankara. . . . Mustafa Kemal here reverted to the methods of some of the worst of the Sultans.¹¹

COMPARING ATATÜRK AND LENIN

Price, in his *A History of Turkey: From Empire to Republic*, makes a captivating comparison between Lenin and Mustafa Kemal, giving credit to the latter

in many aspects rather than the Soviet leader for whom he had sympathies. For Price, Mustafa Kemal did not possess an intellectual quality and was not brilliant, but having the virtue of not being dogmatic, and being a man of wisdom, he had the necessary ingredients for the success of a leader in his stature.

Unlike Lenin, his opposite number in Russia, Kemal was not a great intellectual or writer, or one who sought to base his actions on well-thought-out theories. He had a strong empirical side to his nature. . . . Like Lenin, he was not brilliant but, like Lenin, he had the practical sense of what was possible. Wisdom rather than cleverness was his great characteristic.¹²

Fifty years later a prominent Turkish historian, an acclaimed expert on late Ottoman history who had chaired the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, made similar observations on Mustafa Kemal, while diverging on certain points. In the Conclusion of his *Atatürk: An Intellectual Biography* (2011), a unique work that distinguishes it among all other biographies of Mustafa Kemal, Prof. Şükrü Hanioglu wrote:

While Mustafa Kemal Atatürk played a momentous role in the transition from the Ottoman order to modern Turkey, his work cannot be considered that of a sagelike dispenser of wisdom who came to the scene with novel ideas and an original program.

First, Atatürk was no thinker in the order of Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, or Vladimir Il'ich Lenin. He was not a philosopher who produced a systematic theory attempting to encompass all aspects of life and society. He was not even a devout disciple of an ideology. . . . Indeed, a scholar of political theory might find Atatürk's ideas extremely pragmatic and thin on content. Rather, he was a down-to-earth leader who strove to realize a vision not by depending on any one ideology but by utilizing a range of sources. . . . The Westernizers of the Second Constitutional Period had envisaged a Mannheimian utopia in which a scientific society categorically rejected tradition and wholeheartedly embraced a modernity within the parameters of an "international civilization." Mustafa Kemal, as an "authoritarian savior," brought this utopia to fruition: thus, his role was that of an interpreter and executor. More precisely, he was the individual who transformed an intellectual utopia . . . into a political program and then proceeded to implement it vigorously as head of state.

Consequently, despite the radical changes that it brought about, the Turkish transformation led by Atatürk was not a rupture with the Late Ottoman past but, in important respects, its continuation.¹³

ERDOĞAN'S PEACE WITH ATATÜRK

The same could be said for Erdoğan's "New Turkey," which was promoted during the second half of the 2010s. The radical departure of Tayyip Erdoğan from parliamentary democracy to the autocracy of a presidential system endowed with extraordinary executive powers was not a rupture with its Kemalist Republican past, but in important respects a continuation. Notably, just as the Izmir conspiracy in 1926 was utilized by Mustafa Kemal to establish an uncontested personal power, so the coup attempt in 2016 served the same purpose for Tayyip Erdoğan, with striking similarities.

The Erdoğan epoch had been marked by a certain sequence of developments. The election of Erdoğan to presidency by popular vote (August 2014), the renewed elections that enabled him to amend the Constitution for the executive presidency (November 2015), and thwarting the alleged Gülenist coup that helped him to get rid of all the opposition and potential challengers to his power (July 2016) are key among these. They occurred during one of the three longest periods of autocratic rule in modern Turkish history. The first such period was Sultan Abdülhamid II's reign that lasted 31 years from 1878 to 1909. The second was the post-Unionist reign of two of the former Unionists, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and İsmet İnönü, altogether 25 years from 1925 to 1950. While Atatürk was saluted as the "Eternal Chief," the latter was given the name "National Chief." This can be seen as compatible with the practices of their era in history that had named the Italian leader Benito Mussolini as "Duce," and the German leader Adolf Hitler as "Führer." Tayyip Erdoğan is simply and briefly addressed as "Reis" (The Chief) by his faithful, and has surpassed Atatürk in terms of the longevity of his reign.

In his preface to the "intellectual biography" of Atatürk, entitled *Kemalism in Post-Kemalist Turkey*, historian Şükrü Hanioglu underlines that Kemalism resisted time and change much better because of its pragmatic and adjustable nature, "thus instead of a distinct, explicit Kemalism, numerous conflicting Kemalisms flourished and competed inconsolably against each other."¹⁴ Erdoğan's "Kemalism" is one among them. The early versions of Kemalism had "strongly criticized democracy as an ineffectual . . . political system, highlighting the necessity of a 'Chief' competently guiding a nation and bringing it to glory and greatness,"¹⁵ and this perfectly compounds with Erdoğan's vision of Turkey, which would lead toward the 100th anniversary of the republic founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. In this regard, Tayyip Erdoğan's choice of Samsun, the coastal city by the Black Sea, to start his 2014 campaign for presidential elections was not coincidental. It basically implied a resemblance to Mustafa Kemal's decision to launch the National Struggle which took place in the same city almost a century ago. In

Turkish hagiography of the War of Independence and the birth of the new (Republican) Turkey, Mustafa Kemal's disembarkation on May 19, 1919, in Samsun is considered as the holy date. It is also adopted as the birthday of Atatürk as the real date is not known.

With his claim that he had launched the "Second War of Independence," Erdoğan had to glorify the previous one and its leader. This was also necessary to justify and legitimize his bid for the new effort, and more importantly his leadership of it. Ryan Gingeras in one of the most striking revisionist accounts of the modern history of Turkey not only illustrates how Erdoğan embraced Atatürk but also hints at the dangerous consequences of the "Second War of Independence" presupposed especially for the Kurds:

Turkey's war of independence lasted from the spring of 1919 to the fall of 1922. . . . It was during this era that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk established himself as the country's founding father. There is little doubt that his hard earned victory over the Greeks and their allies in 1922 provided the moral basis for Atatürk's subsequent cultural and political revolution. . . . There are many aspects of the Turkish war of independence that make its retelling convoluted and challenging. . . . The period between 1919 and 1922 was, for example, as much a civil war as it was a fight between occupiers and resisters. At no point during the conflict did the creation of the Turkish Republic appear fated or predestined. Anatolia's inhabitants were deeply divided over the future of their government, as well as who or what would serve as a genuine source of leadership and sovereignty

As late as 1922, large segments of the population opposed Mustafa Kemal's forces and were loyal to the Ottoman sultan. . . . Atatürk pointedly attacked supporters of the sultan's government as traitors and foreign sympathizers. Even more frequently, treason during the War of Independence was defined along sectarian and ethnic lines. Atatürk's camp considered all Muslims natural supporters of their cause despite profound internal differences over matters of politics and society. By contrast, Atatürk and his supporters depicted Christians, be they Armenians or Greeks, as prone to foreign collaboration. Others among Atatürk's inner circle privately cast suspicions upon Muslim minorities, be they Kurds, Alevis, or Circassians, as incapable of being fully trustworthy.

In retelling the War of Independence, the Turkish textbooks by no means disregards these internal rifts and incongruities. . . . Internal uprisings and popular opposition to Kemalism represented, as treason born either out of foreign meddling, anti-Turkish prejudice, or reactionary politics.

Whatever aversion Turkey's current president may have toward Kemalism and self-declared Kemalists, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has embraced, almost in its entirety, the traditional narrative and conclusions of the War of Independence, as expressed in the Turkish curriculum. . . . In his estimation, Turkey has long

been involved in a life or death struggle against enemies lurking at home and abroad. Both then and now, rival foreign powers native traitors threaten the country's very existence. . . . Erdoğan openly named the groups he deems traitorous and threatening: Gülenists, Kurdish militants, supporters of the Gezi Park demonstrations. While calling the attempted coup of July 2016 "the most serious hardship since the War of Independence," Erdoğan has also repeatedly assured his audience that Turks are destined to emerge today's crises victorious. . . . In conjuring up the notion of a new War of Independence, Erdoğan has subtly cast himself as the nation's savior akin to Mustafa Kemal. . . .

Given what is at stake, Erdoğan's insistence that Turkey's war of independence is repeating itself may have truly frightful consequences. Claiming that today's political dissidents are no different from the Greeks and rebellious Muslims a century ago implies that such opponents need to be fought on the same terms.¹⁶

Such a conclusion entails that the Kurds, being the "new other," replacing Greeks and rebellious Muslims, mainly the Circassians, would be in permanent jeopardy. In Erdoğan's "New Turkey," as long as Kurds preserve their ethno-national aspirations, they would continue to serve as an antagonistic object for Turkish nationalist mobilization.

KURDS: UNIFYING ELEMENT FOR TURKISH NATIONALISTS

Tayyip Erdoğan's claim, not for repudiation of Atatürk but as his heir, was captured by Halil Karaveli, the Turkish-Swedish scholar, in his 2018 work *Why Turkey Is Authoritarian: From Atatürk to Erdoğan*. Karaveli draws attention to the democratic aspirations of the Kurds, an anathema for Turkish nationalism and that has played a role in Erdoğan's latecomer veneration of Atatürk:

The challenge that the democratic aspirations of the Kurds poses has pulled the Islamic conservatives into the orbit of Turkish nationalism as well. It was unprecedented but not a coincidence, that Erdoğan, speaking on the 79th anniversary of the death of Atatürk on 10 November 2017, vowed to "protect the legacy of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk." It was the first time the Islamic conservative leader of Turkey referred to the secularist founder of the state by his last name, thus tacitly recognizing him as the 'father' of the nation, something he had until then made a point of avoiding. The president stressed that "our nation's respect for Atatürk is eternal," and that "we aim to bring the nation above the level of contemporary civilization, which he (Atatürk) pointed out as his greatest aim."¹⁷

Referring to the self-appointed Kemalist guardians of the Turkish state, the military “was always unhappy about the peace talks” and “in 2014, the chief of the general staff publicly expressed the military’s displeasure with the peace process with the PKK,” Karaveli observed that “Erdoğan adopted the Kurdish policy prescribed by the generals” and therefore “Kemalism was resuscitated. . . . The Turkish state elite once again opted for brute force to secure Anatolia as a ‘Turkish abode.’” Terming Tayyip Erdoğan’s ideological stand as one of “Neo-Ottomanism,” he concluded that “Neo-Ottomanism gave way to Kemalism.”¹⁸

This was synonymous with saying that autocracy had prevailed over democracy in Turkey—as has been the case for most of its modern history.

NOTES

1. Gingeras, *Heroin, Organized Crime*, 3–4.
2. Zürcher, *The Young Turk Legacy and Nation Building*, 106, 107–110.
3. *Ibid.*, 77–78.
4. *Ibid.*, 108.
5. *Ibid.*, viii–ix.
6. François Georgeon, *Abdülhamid II, Le sultan calife (1876–1909)* (Paris: Fayard, 2003).
7. For Abdülhamid’s power struggle, see the Turkish-language edition of François Georgeon, *Sultan Abdülhamid* (İstanbul: Homer Kitabevi, 2006), 130–38.
8. Madeleine Albright with Bob Woodward, *Fascism, A Warning* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2018), 153.
9. Kinross, *Atatürk*, 475.
10. Price, *A History of Turkey*, 134.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, 135.
13. Şükrü Hanioglu, *Atatürk, An Intellectual Biography* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 226, 227.
14. *Ibid.*, xii.
15. *Ibid.*, xiii.
16. Ryan Gingeras, “Implications behind Erdogan’s ‘Second War of Independence,’” *Muftah.org*, July 11, 2017, <http://www.newagebd.net/article/19767/implications-behind-erdogans-second-war-of-independence>.
17. Halil Karaveli, *Why Turkey Is Authoritarian: From Atatürk to Erdoğan* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 216.
18. *Ibid.*, 217–19.

Chapter 16

New Turkey *A Reincarnation*

The roots of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's "New Turkey" can be found in the decades that preceded the foundation of the Turkish republic. The ultranationalist Young Turks who ruled the Ottoman Empire during its final years—with catastrophic consequences—have extended their tentacles into the present. To preserve his power, Erdoğan has made a Faustian deal with their incarnations.¹

That was the introduction to my essay dated December 20, 2017. Its title "New Turkey: Neo-nationalist or the Reincarnation of the 'Old'?" insinuated the historical continuity between the autocratic power of the Committee of Union and Progress during the last days of the Ottoman Empire and Erdoğan's "New Turkey." Therefore, it is not as "New" as its advocates claim. Secondly, in Turkey, the grandchildren of the Unionists, the main pillars of Turkey's "deep state," and the neo-Hamidians, represented by Erdoğan and his quasi-Islamists, have merged to create a unique and unprecedented alliance in the last incarnation of Turkish autocracy. That is "new" indeed, a phenomenon reflecting the recurring character of Ottoman-Turkish history of the last 150 years, in which the milestones have pronounced continuity as much rupture in the flow of history.

THREE FATHERS FOR ONE NATION

Almost a year later, I encountered a very perceptive work by the respected Turkish historian Edhem Eldem on Sultan Abdülhamid II (1842–1918), who reigned from 1876 to 1909 until he was deposed by the Unionists. In the introduction, Eldem underlined that his endeavor was to address "the

question of possible continuities between Hamidian autocracy and today's authoritarian Turkey under Erdoğan. The exercise is all the more tempting due to the growing way in which the political party in power and its followers are actively engaged in rehabilitating and glorifying Abdülhamid."²

The title of Eldem's work "Sultan Abdülhamid II: Founding Father of the Turkish State?" was even more intriguing since it followed the publication of a revolutionary book by Hans-Lukas Kieser entitled *Talaat Pasha, Father of Modern Turkey, Architect of Genocide*. The time difference between the publication of two works was only one month, and the choice of individuals referred to in both titles as the "Father" of Modern Turkey seemed a matter of dispute: Was it really Sultan Abdülhamid II, or the man who masterminded his overthrow and was eventually elevated to become Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire until the end of the Great War, Talât Pasha?

The issue is not just a matter for academic debate because of its relevance to understanding Turkey's post-2014 or rather post-coup (July 2016) power configuration. Russian-Ukrainian historian Igor Torbakov, who is very prolific in drawing parallels between today's Russia and Turkey, as well as between Vladimir Putin and Tayyip Erdoğan, wrote:

Like his counterpart in Russia, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is looking for a historical role model that can help him justify cloaking his presidency in regal trappings. And like Russia's Vladimir Putin, Erdogan is bypassing the revolutionary and republican eras, and focusing on the late imperial period. Putin's new favorite role model seems to be Tsar Alexander III (r. 1881–1894). For Erdogan, it is Sultan Abdulhamid II (r. 1876–1909)³

The omnipresent last name, Atatürk, of the uncontested founder of the Republic, Mustafa Kemal, literally means the "Father of Turks" and therefore and quite naturally he plays a major part in such debates. In the same period as Eldem published his work naming "Sultan Abdülhamid II" as Father and Kieser published his naming "Talaat Pasha," another scholar, Ahmet İnsel, published his *Rupture et continuité dans la politique autoritaire d'Erdoğan*. It was also presented at a seminar at SOAS in London under its English title *Rupture and Continuity in Erdoğan's Authoritarian Policy*. İnsel, a former Dean at the University of Sorbonne in Paris and a professor at Galatasaray University in İstanbul, was my colleague in the Turkish daily *Radikal* and the Democratic Progress Institute. He articulated the differences between Atatürk and Erdoğan that could suggest a rupture between them. Yet, he also illustrated some areas where Erdoğan could be seen as the continuation of Atatürk, irrespective of the *Kulturkampf* between secularism and Islam, which is regarded as the main fault line by scholars around the world who analyze Turkey. Most of them have identified this fault line as a result of

a perennial confrontation. Nationalism and the stance on the Kurds, which complement each other in the Turkish case, were the common traits linking Erdoğan and Atatürk. İnsel's argument is as follows:

The fear of the loss of national unity, particularly in the demands for recognition by the Kurds is the third source of gathering behind Erdoğan. The ruling coalition is the clearest illustration of this. The most nationalist and sovereignist sectors of the left, the historical Kemalist currents, do not hesitate to support Erdoğan at crucial moments in this confrontation with the Kurds. . . . He is the defender of the nation's unity in the face of the Kurds' demands which he has assimilated again since 2015 to terrorism. . . . He took the sign of the Muslim Brotherhood . . . and transformed it into a slogan: 'One nation, one flag, one homeland, one state.' The neo-Kemalists have nothing to say or add to this program.⁴

ANTI-KURDISH NATIONALISM: AN END TO "CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS"

An even more striking issue here is what Erdoğan's "New Turkey" signified. It is not the "Islamist Turkey" as misleadingly seen in many parts of the Western world but basically a "nationalist" one, as emphasized by Prof. Ömer Taşpınar, who used to run the Turkey Project at a significant Washington think-tank, the Brookings Institution. Alluding to Samuel Huntington's (1927–2008) controversial "Clash of Civilizations" thesis, which provoked great debate among international relations theorists in the first decades of the post-Cold War period, Taşpınar presented the following strong argument:

Samuel Huntington still casts a long shadow over modern Turkey. And that is unfortunate. The late Harvard professor once characterized the country as "torn" between East and West. And so according to the Huntington binary worldview of civilizational confrontation, the current Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, is a dangerous Islamist determined to overhaul the secularist legacy of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founding father of Westernized Turkey. Thus many today see Turkey's increasing divergence from the West to be a result of Turkey's Islamic revivalism. . . .

To be sure, Islam plays a role in Erdoğan's politics, but the real driver of his strategic vision is nationalism. . . . Today, the East-West and secular-Islamist clichés no longer capture the complexity of Turkish domestic and foreign policy. . . . Today, the real threat to Turkey's Western and democratic orientation is no longer Islamization, but a broad-based Turkish nationalism and its frustration with liberalism and pluralism. . . . And this has become much more alarming lately. For it has allowed, after the failed coup in 2016, for an ultra-nationalist

realignment in politics that threatens to pull Turkey toward proto-fascism. In essence, what has emerged is a marriage between Erdoğan, the ultra-nationalist MHP (or Nationalist Movement Party) and the Turkish military (or what's left of it, since more than a third of its flag officers have been discharged or detained since 2016).⁵

Mücahit Bilici, a thinker and an author known with Islamist tendencies, went much further than Taşpınar in depicting the predominant nationalist characteristic of Erdoğan rule in a strong-worded description of how it emerged in the international stage:

Turkish Islamism offered the world an ugly Muslim nationalism, a nouveau-riche ethos of conspicuous consumption, and kleptocratic handling of public resources.⁶

Acknowledging the differences between the Kemalists and what Taşpınar termed as neo-Ottomans, I prefer to term the latter as “neo-Hamidians” who are represented by Erdoğan. As Taşpınar accurately observed,

Their divergence is clearly more pronounced in domestic politics. But even there they have more in common than one might suppose. Both camps are virulently anti-Kurdish, for example. And despite significant differences between the “secularist nationalism” of the Kemalists and the “religious nationalism” of the neo-Ottomans, both are strong proponents of nationalistic interests grounded in nostalgia for Turkish pre-eminence and independence from the West.⁷

Taşpınar also refers to the alignment between those ‘neo-Ottomans’ and Kemalists, mentions “especially. . . the ‘Eurasianist’ wing (who are well represented among military officers now progressing up the army echelons), that resulted in Turkey’s military offensive in northern Syria, its growing anti-Americanism, its rapprochement with Russia and Iran, its frustration with the EU, and its war against the PKK Kurdish militant group,”⁸ and concludes that “if current trends continue, what will emerge is not an Islamist polity but a Turkey with a strategic orientation that is much more defiant, independent, self-confident and self-centered—in short, a Turkish variant of Gaullism.”⁹

NEO-HAMIDIANS AND NEO-UNIONISTS: AN UN-CATHOLIC MARRIAGE

A pioneering text to decipher today’s Turkey was my article that was published in December 2017. The codes to comprehend the exclusive character of Erdoğan’s “New Turkey” were advanced in more concise terms:

Since the botched military coup of July 15, 2016, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has emerged as the uncontested strongman of his country and the drift into an increasingly autocratic regime continues unabated. However, identifying the ideological contours of this authoritarianism is a challenge for political analysts and observers who attempt to make sense of the Turkish regime. There is no consensus among scholars and intellectuals, and the characterizations of the “New Turkey” of Erdoğan vary widely. Turkish intellectuals with leftist and quasi-Marxist tendencies do not hesitate to label the regime “fascist.” They claim that the Turkish regime manifests many similarities with that of Nazi period of Germany of the 1930s. Others argue that the Turkish regime is mainly autocratic, on the fringe of totalitarianism. . . . Nilüfer Göle, a renowned Turkish expert on Islamic movements, writing in the Huffington Post, argues that Turkey is undergoing a radical shift from pluralism to Islamic populism: “Illiberal values and populist movements are gaining ground not only among emerging countries and in authoritarian regimes but also among Western democracies. Turkey, an interface country between Islam and the West, finds itself at the epicenter of this transmutation. Over the last three decades, a country of promise, an emerging star in the Middle East, a model Muslim country that combined religion and secularism, economic development, political pluralism and open society, now faces a total collapse of democratic institutions and individual freedoms. . . . Turkish society is going through radical change, turning from an open society into one governed by Islamic populism.”¹⁰

If one would seek a radically differing view from that of Göle on defining what President Erdoğan’s “New Turkey” is all about, this publication’s editor Halil Karaveli provides it. For Karaveli, Turkey’s political regime has overall been characterized by one form or another of authoritarianism. In his important essay “Turkey’s Authoritarian Legacy” in the *Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, he argues that it is right-wing continuity from Atatürk to Erdoğan that accounts for the hold of authoritarianism. He contends that “a closer look reveals that secularists and Islamists are in fact two sides of the right.”¹¹

Turkey’s new power configuration began to take shape during the power struggle that tore apart the alliance of Erdoğan and the followers of Fethullah Gülen. The “civil war” between the two versions of Turkish Islamism dealt a death-blow to political Islam in Turkey in terms of the foundational ideology for the “New Turkey.” The self-destruction of political Islam in Turkey has brought to the fore the regenerated and replenished old state establishment of Turkey, the offspring of the Young Turk school of politics of the late Ottoman Empire.

In 2005, their political offspring founded the Talât Paşa Komitesi (The Committee of Talât Pasha.) The committee was—not innocently—named after the unionist interior minister and later Grand Vizier during the First World War who was the main culprit of the Armenian genocide. Talât Pasha, who is revered by the neo-nationalists, was guilty of crimes against humanity, as the leading organizer of the extermination of the Ottoman Armenians. The

founding of the Committee of Talât Pasha was an act of defiance on the part of the neo-nationalist elements within the Turkish deep state that resented the liberal reforms that the Justice and Development Party (AKP) had embarked on during its early years in government. Its members included Rauf Denktaş, the staunchly nationalist founding president of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus; Doğu Perinçek, the leader of the extreme nationalist “Workers’ Party,” which has since been renamed The “Homeland Party” (Vatan Partisi, VP); and a number of high-ranking officers, among whom the head of the military intelligence. Perinçek is today an ally of President Erdoğan, and the former head of the military intelligence is the vice chairman of Perinçek’s party. The Committee of Talât Pasha represented the public face of Turkey’s “deep state” in the first decade of the 2000s. Its members vigorously opposed Turkey’s bid for membership in the European Union, any sort of compromise to solve the Cyprus problem; they had an unflinchingly anti-Kurdish discourse and they vehemently rejected reconciliation with Armenia.

These neo-unionists are part of the wider, secularist-nationalist formation, the so-called *ulusalcılar*. The word literally means nationalists and can thus be understood as synonymous with *milliyetçiler*, the traditional Turkish word for nationalists, but the words nonetheless refer to two distinct, nationalist constituencies. The latter are traditional right-wing nationalists, while the former are secularists who claim to be “progressives” and of the “left.” The Nationalist Action Party (MHP), led by Devlet Bahçeli, represents the traditional right-wing nationalism which caters in equal measure to Turkish ethnic nationalism and to Sunni conservatism. The political representative of the extreme secularist-nationalism is the “Homeland Party” (VP). On the face of it, the party is insignificant. The VP has no electoral record to speak of: as a rule, the party scores less than 1 percent in elections, yet that is no measure of its influence. The VP is a sort of hub of deep state elements; what distinguishes several of its representatives is the fact that they have occupied key positions in the military’s top echelons, primarily in the military intelligence and in the state security apparatus in general. Most of them were purged and jailed during the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer trials between 2007 and 2014.

After Erdoğan’s volte face in 2014, the deep state nationalists have made a come-back in grand style. They were not only released from prison, but were in many cases returned to their key positions in the security establishment. They have been instrumental in masterminding the rapprochement between Turkey and Russia that had begun on the eve of the 2016 coup attempt and which has been pursued in its aftermath. These nationalists within the Turkish state establishment are also referred to as Eurasianists, and they are strongly present within the military. They espouse anti-American and anti-NATO views, and advocate an eastward strategic realignment that would make Turkey the partner of Russia, Iran and China.

In 2015, the coalition that had been formed in 2014 between Erdoğan and the neo-unionists was broadened with the participation of the right-wing nationalist MHP. MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli had previously opposed the introduction of an executive presidency; he now became a vocal advocate of such a constitutional amendment. This was prompted by the historical showing of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) in the general election in June 2015. For the first time, a pro-Kurdish party crossed the 10-percent threshold that had been designed to keep pro-Kurdish parties out of parliament. The HDP entered the parliament with a formidable 80-member bloc. In this situation, the interests of Erdoğan and the "deeper" interests of the state converged: the parliament, in which there would be a significant Kurdish representation, had to be rendered irrelevant with the introduction of an executive presidency.

Since 2015, Turkey is governed by a nationalist coalition that is an amalgam of neo-unionists, traditional ethnic Turkish right-wing nationalists and Islamist nationalists. It has been further cemented after the 2016 coup attempt. It is, in a sense, a continuation of the "Old Turkey," rooted in the last days of the Ottoman Empire. This is a coalition that revives and joins together two distinct—and what was at the time opposing—traditions: the secular nationalism of the Young Turks, the unionists, and the Islamism of the Sultan Abdülhamid II that the Young Turks deposed in 1909. Abdülhamid was a despot who sought to maintain the unity of the Ottoman Empire by emphasizing an Islamic identity, at the expense of the Christian subjects. The Young Turks were secular nationalists, but in fact they finished what Abdülhamid had begun when they annihilated the Ottoman Armenians. President Erdoğan is seen as the reincarnation of Abdülhamid by his Islamist supporters, the sultan who is despised for his Islamism by the secularist nationalists in the unionist and Kemalist tradition. Yet in an ironic twist, Erdoğan recently—and for the first time—embraced the secularist founding father of Turkey, Kemal Atatürk, to the consternation and astonishment of some in his own constituency. But this was not a coincidence.

When it comes to upholding state authoritarianism, the frontiers between the secular state elite and the Islamists were never insurmountable. It was the military regime in the 1980s that developed a "Turkish-Islamic synthesis." Erdoğan's regime represents both a continuation and a break with the old Turkey. It is a different incarnation of the old, with the omnipresence of the "deep state" in the background. Erdoğan is an asset for the "deep state:" he provides it with an electoral following that the "deep state" has never before enjoyed. In return, he is allowed to pursue an Islamist agenda, to the extent that the nationalist-centralist-authoritarian underpinnings and pillars of Turkish state are not endangered.

Such a political marriage, symbolized by the alliance between the devotees of Abdülhamid II and the modern day disciples of those, the ultranationalist unionists, who removed the sultan from power, is new and unprecedented. That, absolutely, is the "New Turkey" of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.¹²

In other words, Erdoğan's "New Turkey" was "new" in the sense that it was reflected in an un-Catholic, unprecedented, and unique marriage between the neo-Hamidians and the neo-Unionists. This political marriage of convenience was described in another piece published on *Turkey Analyst* almost a year later, which read:

The American-Kurdish partnership in Syria has helped to bring about a convergence in Turkey of two diverse strains of authoritarian nationalism that were originally in opposition: of the Islamic conservative nationalism and of the more secular right-wing nationalism that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), respectively represent. The latter nationalist current has traditionally been promoted by the Turkish "deep state," and has its origins in the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) that ruled the Ottoman Empire during its last decade. The Unionists—better known as Young Turks in the West—ascended to power after deposing Sultan Abdülhamid II, a despot who had sought to save the Empire by promoting Islam as its binding glue, at the expense of his Christian subjects. Abdülhamid has historically been the idol of Turkish conservatives and Islamists, while his Unionist foes, who were the forerunners of the Kemalists, are venerated by modernist, secular nationalists. The alliance that neo-Hamidian and neo-Unionists have forged since 2014, although in a sense unorthodox, is nonetheless the expression of an historical continuity of violent nationalism: the Unionists continued what had begun during the reign of Abdülhamid II when they exterminated the Ottoman Armenians. The new power configuration also includes the pseudo-leftist nationalist groups, known as *ulusalcılar* who venerate Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.¹³

Mine was an attempt to conceptualize the "New Turkey's" power configuration through a neo-Hamidian-neo-Unionist alliance as its central powerhouse, which includes the pseudo-leftist nationalists as an innovative and more importantly an accurate assessment.

UNITED IN CREATING A PURE MUSLIM NATION

Besides the linkage between Abdülhamid and the Unionists, some historians do not spare Mustafa Kemal from the acts of extermination that targeted the former Ottoman Christians of Asia Minor. In laying the foundation stones of the Turkish nation-state, Abdülhamid, the Unionists, and then Mustafa Kemal each played similar roles, thus establishing a historical continuity rather than the successor representing the negation of the predecessor. Two renowned Israeli historians, Benny Morris and Dror Ze'evi, in what was

arguably the most explosive book in the field, *The Thirty-Year Genocide*, presented their account on the continuity of between the Hamidian, Unionist, and Kemalist epochs of recent Turkish history in terms of violent nationalism. *The Thirty-Year Genocide*, published in 2019, was introduced with highly charged wording that would appear unacceptable to many people in Turkish society:

Between 1894 and 1924, three waves of violence swept across Anatolia, targeting the region's Christian minorities, who had previously accounted for 20 percent of the population. By 1924, the Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks had been reduced to 2 percent. Most historians have treated these waves as distinct, isolated events, and successive Turkish governments presented them as an unfortunate sequence of accidents. The Thirty-Year Genocide is the first account to show that the three were actually part of a single, continuing, and intentional effort to wipe out Anatolia's Christian population.

The years in question, the most violent in the recent history of the region, began during the reign of the Ottoman sultan Abdulhamid II, continued under the Young Turks, and ended during the first years of the Turkish Republic founded by Atatürk. Yet despite the dramatic swing from the Islamizing autocracy of the sultan to the secularizing republicanism of the post-World War I period, the nation's annihilationist policies were remarkably constant, with continual recourse to premeditated mass killing, homicidal deportation, forced conversion, mass rape, and brutal abduction. And one thing more was a constant: the rallying cry of jihad. While not justified under the teachings of Islam, the killing of two million Christians was effected through the calculated exhortation of the Turks to create a pure Muslim nation.¹⁴

THE GREAT EMPEROR AND THE "MASTER": SOURCES OF INSPIRATION FOR ERDOĞAN

The premise as postulated and developed in the *Turkey Analyst* publications in December 2017 and February 2019 was enhanced by historian Ehdem Eldem's excellent scholarly work regarding the threads and the similarities that link Abdülhamid with the Unionists who deposed him, and finally with Erdoğan on whom he has more impact than any other historical figure. Eldem was keen to emphasize the similarities between Mustafa Kemal and Erdoğan, as well. Quoting a fellow historian Selim Deringil, he makes a strong argument:

"Were the Kemalists a total break with the Hamidian past? . . . In fact a direct thread can be drawn from the gilded antechambers of the Sublime Porte to the

ramshackle parliament building in Ankara. . . . Abdülhamid and Mustafa Kemal, would have found that they had much in common.”¹⁵ On the other hand, is it not true that some critical observers today are suggesting that Erdoğan may be in fact closer to emulating the Kemalist legacy he is supposedly intent on destroying? Indeed, Atatürk’s career provides ample ground for comparison with his eleventh successor. He was a powerful president in a parliamentary system; he relied extensively on populism he promoted nationalism with strong undertones of xenophobia; he often bypassed, overruled, or strong-armed the executive, legislative, and judiciary; he practiced personal power through informal networks and loyalties; finally he became (and still is) the object of one of the longest-lasting cults of personality. Notwithstanding major differences, these similarities could be used to assess Erdoğan’s present situation.¹⁶

Eldem, brilliantly, emphasized Abdülhamid’s enduring legacy on his successors, extending to Erdoğan:

Through careful manipulation and ideological engineering, Abdülhamid was able to transform popular and cultural Islam into the expression of an ideology of victimization and resentment, directed against a constantly redefined array of domestic and foreign enemies. This is yet another powerful legacy of the Hamidian regime, which not only permeated the ideology and modus operandi of his archenemies, the Young Turks, but also remained a constant, if latent, element of Turkish policy from the early republican years to this day. If, when scratched on the surface, Kemalist secularism reveals an implicit equation between Turkish and Muslim, and if xenophobia and conspiracy theories remain a constitutive element of populist discourse in Turkey, it seems we have Abdülhamid to congratulate Abdülhamid’s contribution to authoritarianism cannot be underestimated. By creating his autocratic regime as an alternative, not only to constitutionalism, but also to the bureaucratic and legalist tradition of the Tanzimat, he paved the way to a form of modern personal rule that would eventually play a crucial role in late Ottoman and Turkish politics. . . . The “Ottoman springtime” that followed Abdülhamid’s reign was too short-lived and too hasty to bring any significant change to the state model that had developed under three decades of autocracy and deconstruction. Under the pressure of war and nationalism, the Young Turk Revolution soon morphed into a militarist dictatorial regime, which to a large extent provided the blueprint for the Kemalist regime that would replace it after the collapse of the empire. While militarism and nationalism created the basis for extraordinary measures legitimized by the argument of the state’s survival, charismatic leadership, combined with the *Zeitgeist* of the 1920s and 1930s laid the foundation of an authoritarian state model.¹⁷

What has never been a matter for debate is the influence of Abdülhamid II on Tayyip Erdoğan. Abdülhamid has been revered by every single individual in Turkey with an Islamist or simply a pious-religious upbringing. He is called by them “Ulu Hakan” (The Great Emperor). The title was coined by Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (1904–1983), a poet and an Islamist-nationalist ideologue. His devotees referred him succinctly as “Üstad” (Master) and he admittedly was a major ideological source of inspiration for Erdoğan.

Necip Fazıl Kısakürek was the ideological inspiration for a generation of Turkish Islamists and right-wing nationalists . . . who built a coherent ideological structure for Turkish Islamism called *Büyük Doğu*, or “Great Orient” . . . developed a very detailed political ideology [and] . . . advocated the ‘introduction of a totalitarian Islamist regime inspired by the Turkish-Islamic synthesis.’¹⁸

The writer of these lines reminded his readers that Erdoğan’s inspiration was not Necmettin Erbakan, the lifelong leader of the Islamist parties that Erdoğan himself also served at every level, but Kısakürek. “He confirmed this in a 2002 interview with the Economist’s Turkey correspondent, who asked which world figure had influenced and inspired him. The response was unequivocal: ‘Necip Fazıl Kısakürek.’”¹⁹ For Eldem, “Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (1904–1983) was the most powerful advocate of [Abdülhamid’s] rehabilitation, the arguments of which were embodied in his *Ulu Hakan Abdülhamid Han* (The Great Emperor Abdülhamid Khan), published in 1965.”²⁰

Historian Igor Torbakov, too, provided interesting insights about the bond between the “Master” and his disciple Erdoğan.

The present-day official glorification of Abdulhamid II is one outcome of a decades-long process of history rewriting by Turkey’s Islamist authors. Most prominent among them was Necip Fazıl Kısakurek, an anti-Semitic poet, novelist and Islamist thinker who sought to replace the Kemalist secular notion of nationalism with an Islamist one. . . . Kısakurek considered Abdulhamid as his “historical friend,’ who, as caliph, struggled to keep the empire intact. Conversely, Kısakurek had no love for secularist republicans, who, in his view, accepted the loss of empire, abolished the caliphate, and suppressed pious Muslims as part of a ruthless program of social engineering. Kısakurek contended that “understanding Abdulhamid is the key to understanding everything.” The implication is that one’s stance toward the late Ottoman sultan is a defining factor in that particular individual’s political and religious orientation. It would appear that Erdoğan has been deeply influenced by Kısakurek’s writings and, in particular, by his interpretation of Abdulhamid’s reign. . . . The Turkish president, who met Kısakurek and attended his funeral at the dawn of

his political career, has himself acknowledged the Islamist poet's intellectual influence on his personal development.²¹

Speaking on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of Kısakürek's death in 2013, Erdoğan "recalled the joys of meeting Necip Fazıl and walking 'the path' alongside him . . . described the poet's life and works as a guide for himself and future generations. . . . Erdoğan recalled that 'the master and his ordeals helped us, like no other, to make sense of history and the present.'"²²

NEW HISTORIOGRAPHY ON NEW TURKEY

Recent scholarship, as opposed to the conventional Kemalist-official hagiography in Turkey, has illustrated the similarities that provide historical continuity between Abdülhamid and the Unionists overthrew him. The parallels between Abdülhamid and the Unionists and their Kemalist offspring are almost as salient as the differences that separate them. To concede those common points they share would help to illuminate and explain the present-day power sharing between the neo-Hamidians represented by Tayyip Erdoğan and the neo-Unionists represented by ultra-nationalists, who are the major constituents of the "deep state." In this respect, the distinguished Turkish historian on genocide studies Taner Akçam alluded the rumor about the letter written by Unionist leader Enver Pasha to Talât Pasha that he wrote, "By dethroning Sultan Abdülhamid, we committed the gravest mistake of our lives. We have misunderstood him." According to Prof. Akçam, Henry Morgenthau, in his account of the Armenian Genocide entitled *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story* and published in 1918, wrote, "Talaat's attitude toward the Armenians was summed up in the proud boast which he made to his friends: 'I have accomplished more toward solving the Armenian problem in three months than Abdul Hamid accomplished in thirty years.'" Morgenthau was the American ambassador to İstanbul between 1913 and 1916 and had resigned from his post in exasperation over Talât Pasha's policies concerning the Armenians. Akçam also asserted that Necip Fazıl Kısakürek in his *Ulu Hakan Abdülhamid Han* had mentioned Talât Pasha having wept to learn about Abdülhamid's death and expressed regret on misunderstanding him.²³

On the cover of Hans-Lukas Kieser's *Talaat Pasha, Father of Modern Turkey and Architect of Genocide*, Talât Pasha is described as "a man who maintained power through a potent blend of the new Turkish ethno-nationalism and the political Islam of former Sultan Abdülhamid II." Kieser began his book's prologue by asking, "Why might we call him a first founder of the Turkish nation-state even before Kemal Atatürk?" and after arguing why, wrote:

He thus became a founding father of a post-Ottoman Turkish nationalist polity . . . operationalizing elements of a new messianic nationalism (Muslim pan-Turkism, also called Turanism), framed by his influential Central Committee friend Ziya Gökalp. Gökalp's nationalism in the 1910s was imperial and politically Muslim, in contrast to its later version adopted by the Kemalists.²⁴

Contrary to the long-lasting erroneous conviction about them, the Unionists were not basically against Islam, nor, in essence, they were against the political Islam of Sultan Abdülhamid whom they removed from power. They were fundamentally trying to secure a homeland upon which a Muslim-Turkish nation-state would be constructed. The terms Muslim and Turkish were interchangeable and synonymous for them. The two main trends of the late Ottoman period laid the foundations of the “deep state,” and that basic ideological-political genealogy enabled power sharing between their offspring, the neo-Hamidians (Erdoğan and his loyalists) and neo-Unionists (the pro-state ultra-nationalists of various brands in the Turkish Republic during the 2010s).

ZEITGEIST OF THE 2010S, POPULIST NATIONALISM AND AUTHORITARIANISM

Moreover, similar to the *Zeitgeist* of the 1920s and 1930s that had laid the foundations of an authoritarian state model combined with charismatic leadership, Turkey under the charismatic leadership of Erdoğan was in full harmony with the *Zeitgeist* of the 2010s. In this respect, we must acknowledge that Erdoğan and Turkey occupied a prominent position in international politics. In the 2010s,

Populist leaders seek to use legitimacy conferred by democratic elections to consolidate power. They claim direct charismatic connection to “the people,” who are often defined in narrow ethnic terms that exclude big parts of the population. They don't like institutions and seek to undermine the checks and balances that limit a leader's personal power in a modern liberal democracy: courts, legislature, an independent media, and a non-partisan bureaucracy. Other contemporary leaders who could be put in this category are [besides American President Donald Trump] Vladimir Putin of Russia, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey, Viktor Orbán of Hungary, Jaroslaw Kaczynski of Poland, and Rodrigo Duterte of The Philippines.²⁵

The names of Xi Jinping of China, Narendra Modi of India, and Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil could be added to the list in which Turkey's Tayyip Erdoğan stood tall.

In the history of modern Turkey, following in the footsteps of Atatürk as a master of populist nationalism, Erdoğan, who has always referred to national will as the legitimacy of his power, irreversibly turned his back on liberal democracy. His choice in that respect was accurately intercepted in the wake of the two elections in 2015:

Populist nationalism can play to people's best and worst instincts, and Erdoğan, like Atatürk, has proved to be a master of making it play to both. . . . Acting in the name of the national or popular will . . . both men also proved all-too-willing to trample on the rights of minorities and individuals whose personal will does not fit with the nation's. Not surprisingly, the idea of the national will is, in different manifestations, central to democracy, but also to fascism. When Atatürk declared that "sovereignty belongs unconditionally to the nation," he invoked a fundamental liberal ideal- while also reminding people that he saved them from sinister forces who wanted to take their sovereignty away. In winning Turkey's war for independence, Atatürk claimed to have delivered Turks from the hands of European imperialists and non-Muslim minorities alike. Atatürk secularism may have alienated many pious Turks, but it was not lost on them that he had just won an implausible victory against a series of foes—the English, French, Italians, Greeks and Armenians—who were all Christian. This victory, in turn, did not just help to consolidate Atatürk's one-party rule, but helped make it popular as well. Today Erdoğan presents his and by extension the nation's enemies as a sinister kaleidoscope of not dissimilar forces.²⁶

The best prognosis about populism undermining democracy and paving the road for autocracy was perhaps presented in 2016 by two American political scientists in their article entitled "How Democracies Fall Apart: Why Populism Is a Pathway to Autocracy." Tayyip Erdoğan's name was mentioned in that regard:

The tactics that today's populists employ to implement their vision of iron rule have evolved. Rather than orchestrating sudden and decisive breaks with democracy, which can elicit domestic and international condemnation, they have learned from populist-fueled strongmen such as Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, Russia's Vladimir Putin, and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Post-Cold War populists such as Chávez, Putin, and Erdogan took a slow and steady approach to dismantling democracy. These leaders first come to power through democratic elections and subsequently harness widespread discontent to gradually undermine institutional constraints on their rule, marginalize the opposition, and erode civil society. The playbook is consistent and straightforward: deliberately install loyalists in key positions of power (particularly in the judiciary

and security services) and neutralize the media buying it, legislating against it, and enforcing censorship. This strategy makes it hard to discern when the break with democracy actually occurs, and its insidiousness poses one of the most significant threats to democracy in twenty-first century. . . .

Not only is populist-fueled authoritarianization is difficult to defeat, it is increasingly giving rise to ‘personalist dictatorship’—particular brand of autocracy in which power is highly concentrated in the hands of an individual . . . the rise of personalist dictatorships is a great cause for concern. . . . [S]uch systems tend to produce the worst outcomes of any type of political regime: they typically pursue the most volatile and aggressive foreign policies, espouse the most xenophobic sentiments . . . and are the least likely to transition to democracy when they collapse.²⁷

Renowned American political scientist and thinker Francis Fukuyama underlined “Turkey’s Erdoğan” next to “Russia’s Putin” in second place among “a host of new populist nationalist leaders” that included the name of America’s Trump, in observing:

One of the striking characteristics of global politics in the second decade of the twenty-first century is that the dynamic new forces shaping it are nationalist or religious parties and politicians, the two faces of identity politics, rather than the class-based left wing parties that were so prominent in the politics of the twentieth century. Nationalism may have been sparked initially by industrialization and modernization, but it has in no way disappeared from the world, including in those countries that have been industrially developed for generations.²⁸

Following the year 2015, I persistently downplayed the “Islamist” aspect of the power structure of Turkey, while emphasizing nationalism as its dominant character, which actually asserted itself at a global scale. Turkey’s nationalism, however, went far beyond the global rise of nationalism thanks to the peculiar geopolitical and cultural characteristics that the country possessed.

TURKEY AND THE KURDS: AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

In Turkey’s case, the new ruling dynamic has become a marriage of convenience between the different formations of nationalism. The tacit union between erstwhile nationalist adversaries was seen as essential against the Kurdish awakening across the Middle East. For the “deep state,” which brokered this marriage of nationalists and which perceived the Kurdish awakening as baptized by the United States, the arrangement ameliorated the existential threat to the Turkish nation-state.

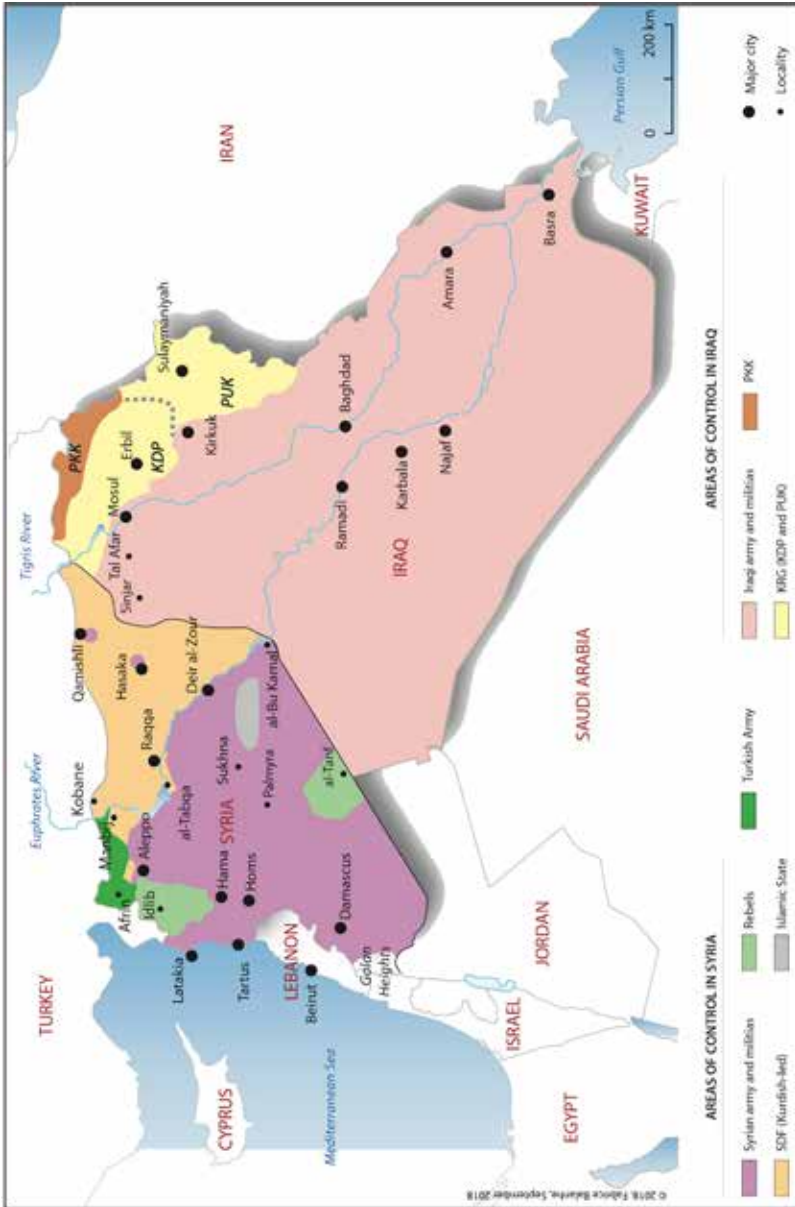


Figure 16.1 Military Situation in Iraqi Kurdistan and Syria. Source: Fabrice Balanche. Retrieved from <http://www.telospress.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Military-situation-in-Levant-September-2018.jpg> on March 21, 2019.

The birth of the KRG had already increased the national consciousness of the Kurds across the region and become a crucial psychological boost for them. The electoral success of the pro-Kurdish HDP in Turkey in 2015 jeopardized Erdoğan's aspirations for absolute power. Moreover the emergence of self-rule represented by the PKK-affiliated PYD/YPG in northern Syria and its interaction with the HDP was witnessed as further manifestation of Kurdish awakening and empowerment. Syrian Kurds' alliance with the Americans set off the alarm bells in Ankara. What both the Turkish President as the nominal head of state, and the "deep state" most feared was being realized: the emergence of a second KRG, this one in Syria all alongside Turkey's long border, intensively inhabited on each side by the Kurds. Worst of all, the Kurds running the "Syrian KRG" were to all intents and purposes the "Syrian branch" of Turkey's Kurdish insurgency, which Ankara could not extinguish. Thus, the war on Syrian Kurds launched.

In other words, the Turkish state elite, then, once again opted for brute force to secure Anatolia as a "Turkish abode."

The trajectory of the Kurdish issue not only buried hopes for a political settlement of the conflict but also provided a major boost for Turkey's vigorous drift to authoritarian rule. Imperfect autocracy replaced illiberal democracy. With such a regime change in Turkey, the future of the Middle East became far more uncertain regarding the Kurds and the Kurdish question.

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Conclusion

Let me begin this postscript with reference to another postscript. It is from a book by a renowned historian on the modern history of Turkey. Interestingly enough, I found my name mentioned in this postscript, penned by Feroz Ahmad: *Turkey: The Quest for Identity*. The book's original publication came in 2003, yet I encountered my name in its revised edition dated 2014 that I found in a bookstore in Berlin in the same year. I have the greatest respect for the author, but I must admit I was surprised to read the following lines in its postscript:

It is not yet clear what the political consequences of “Gezi Park” will be. . . . But one thing seems certain. The JDP has lost the support of the so-called “neo-liberals” who supported the party since it came to power in 2002. One such “neo-liberal,” the journalist Cengiz Çandar, gave his reasons for why he had supported Erdoğan and why he was coming out in opposition to him.

On June 18, while demonstrations and police violence was in full swing, he wrote that he supported Erdoğan because the oppressed supported him; because he was bringing the army under civilian control and thus promoting democracy; because he has taken the road to the EU, thus consolidating democracy; and because he wanted to resolve the Kurdish question.

Why was Erdoğan now losing Cengiz Çandar's pen? Because Erdoğan had permitted police terror in Istanbul, and the rest of Turkey between 31 May and 16 June, especially during the night of 17 June. Pepper-gas canisters were thrown into Divan Hotel (where demonstrators had taken refuge from the police); doctors who came to help the injured were handcuffed; on İstiklal Avenue, a woman bared her chest to the police; a woman in the red dress who stood before the water cannon will be remembered more than any one else. That is what was etched in Çandar's memory when he wrote the article.¹

In self-awareness, I found the qualification as “neo-liberal” less than accurate. Yes, I am liberal-minded and describe myself as a “libertarian,” but I have never been “a neo-liberal” in any possible sense of the word. Nevertheless, with a special place reserved for me in the postscript of a respected historian, I must admit that I felt validated.

Moreover, notwithstanding the inaccuracy of the characterization describing me as a neo-liberal, Feroz Ahmad’s observation that Tayyip Erdoğan had lost my pen in the Gezi events is correct, and the reasons Feroz listed are accurate. I had already outspokenly stated them in my daily column during the events that had shaken the Erdoğan government at its foundations and had a decisive impact on the authoritarian course that the then prime minister Tayyip Erdoğan had set the country on. Yes, Erdoğan had indeed lost my pen, irrevocably. And I was not an exception in that regard.

It was only two years after the publication of Feroz Ahmad’s revised edition of *Turkey, The Quest for Identity*, when the title of a *New York Times* news analysis piece accurately summarized the stage Turkey had reached: “Turkish Leader Erdogan Making New Enemies and Frustrating Old Friends.” The date was July 4, 2016, less than two weeks before the fateful coup attempt that became a milestone in the history of Turkish autocracy.

The article was a good piece of investigative journalism. Sabrina Tavernese who spent many years as *New York Times* correspondent in Turkey had spoken with a diverse coterie of people to reflect an accurate political and societal picture of the country. I was among those she quoted, but I find the following two quotations especially noteworthy: “‘The ship is going and very fast toward the rocks,’ said Ergun Özbudun, a liberal constitutional expert who once defended Mr. Erdogan. ‘Pray for us.’ . . . Even a former friend, who like others feared being identified, said he had known Mr. Erdogan for 40 years, but no longer recognized him.”²

Prof. Özbudun represented Turkey for decades at the Venice Commission, the legal advisory body of the Council of Europe, and maintains a great reputation in the field of Constitutional Law. He was handpicked by Tayyip Erdoğan before the general elections in 2007. Erdoğan entrusted him with forming a committee to prepare a new and liberal, reformist constitution to replace the 1982 constitution, which was the product of the military junta period in Turkey in the early 1980s. Özbudun gathered the best constitutional law experts in Turkey, but the draft constitution they prepared was shelved by Erdoğan soon after the elections. Tayyip Erdoğan had won an astounding victory with 47 percent of the electorate and seemed to have lost interest in a new liberal constitution.

The way Prof. Özbudun was quoted in the *New York Times* piece, along with the anonymous forty-year friend of Erdoğan who “no longer recognized” him, was revealing of the circumstances prevailing in Turkey in June

2016. It also confirmed the position I had taken, particularly from an ethical standpoint, on Erdoğan in the aftermath of the Gezi events of 2013, as was noted in Feroz Ahmad's postscript in 2014. Since July 2016, Turkey was looking more and more like an Orwellian country, without rule of law, and with never-ending crackdowns on dissent, and of course the suppression of its Kurds at every level.

Under such circumstances, losing my pen should be seen perhaps not even as a minor detail for Erdoğan. He was popular enough domestically and, corresponding to the *Zeitgeist*, he had become a dynamic international figure. While "making new enemies and frustrating old friends," he was emerging as a historic personality.

When I settled down to write this book, Erdoğan was at the zenith of his power, at the national and international levels. Obviously, I was one of those "losers" who were defeated by him. Admittedly, my lifelong struggle for a free, prosperous, and strong Turkey in which its Kurdish citizens would enjoy peace, their fundamental liberties, and equal rights with the rest of their compatriots ended in disappointment. It is a well-known dictum that history is written by the winners. In this regard, *Turkey's Mission Impossible, War and Peace with the Kurds* should be seen as a challenge to that dictum that "losers" can also write history with fairness and accuracy. I have taken the challenge, and as of now, I believe that the mission is accomplished.

This book was written for the historical record and has the ambition to be a reference for generations of readers. Thus, there should be no room for emotions, apart from a certain degree of subjectivity, inevitably and admittedly marked by its author's worldview. My physical distance from Turkey during the process of the research and penning of the book, I believe, provided me the sobriety of mind and the scholarly discipline to achieve the task. Tayyip Erdoğan has been treated as one of the main characters in the book, and his place in history was assessed in fairness. Yet it was much harder for me to place Erdoğan in the book than other historical figures like Sultan Abdülhamid II or Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The difficulty had nothing to do with emotions though. Historians insist that a distance of time is crucial for analyzing major developments and processes. Hence, in evaluating Erdoğan's political record, the apprehension of prematurity permanently haunted me. Besides, not much historical work about Erdoğan exists that one could add to, in writing for the historical record.

The only book—in Turkish—is a quasi-biography written by his aide who was in charge of relations with the press when Erdoğan was mayor of İstanbul (1994–1999). It is entitled *Bir Liderin Doğuşu, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan* (The birth of a leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan) and was published for the first time in January 2014, eight months before Erdoğan's election as president. It is

more of a vulgar text suited to a personality cult, rather than a study that provides reflective and interesting biographical information about Erdoğan. I am in possession of its 111th edition, with the publication date March 2014. Perhaps, since 2016, following Erdoğan's rise as Turkey's uncontested strong leader, it has achieved an unbreakable record in the number of editions printed.

It was amusing and surprising for me to find my name in a book that is supposed to be the only biography of Erdoğan. The context in which it is mentioned is, in a sense, ironical. In the chapter entitled "Democracy Symposium," it is asserted that when Tayyip Erdoğan was the Mayor of İstanbul,

during the period when democracy was annulled, and the rule of law was put inside military boots, instead of cursing the darkness, he stood up to light a candle and decided to organize a Democracy Symposium on 13 December 1997. There were four main topics of the symposium. . . . The last one was "Democracy in Turkey" in which Levent Köker (an expert of Constitutional Law, member of the Özbudun commission for drafting a new constitution) and Cengiz Çandar made their presentations. After that last panel [following Cengiz Çandar's presentation] Tayyip Erdoğan took the floor for the closing remarks of the symposium and said 'Demand for democracy is an inalienable human right. . . . And, this supreme right brings a moral duty on whoever demands democracy: he/she has to demand it for everybody. The implementation of democracy requires the State to abandon its disregard for the rule of law, and efforts to make everyone melt in the same pot. The practice of the State in our country is opposite of what should have been. I hope we repeat this kind of meeting to strengthen ourselves. I thank all those who participated this meeting and added a brick in paving the road ahead of us.'³

The symposium on democracy sponsored by Tayyip Erdoğan had slipped from my memory. Nevertheless, when I went over the names of the other participants, I found that except for two people who have been Erdoğan's longtime confidants and one of whom also assumed a ministerial position in the second half of the 2010s, all of them are now out of favor. Some have been imprisoned and convicted after July 2016.

Most of the participants of the democracy symposium sponsored by the Mayor of İstanbul Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 1997 found themselves either behind bars or in exile, and were effectively silenced during the rule of President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The plight of Turkey's once-respected public intellectuals aside, this case reveals how complex and daunting a task it is to develop a sound account on Erdoğan and his political record. Consequently, foreseeing the future trajectory of the Kurdish question in Turkey under Erdoğan's reign—and especially in the region of the Middle

East which is passing through an extremely long period of uncertainty—might be asking the impossible.

Whatever his questionable political conduct may have been as the US secretary of state, Henry Kissinger has been recognized by many as the most impressive strategic mind in the second half of the twentieth century. I had the opportunity and pleasure of having conversations with Kissinger on history, his account of international politics, current political issues, and strategy. Several of our encounters took place in İstanbul. The most memorable, though, was in Copenhagen, on May 31, 2014, when I was seated to his left at the dinner table. Kissinger was already 91 years old and could only hear with his left ear. The lucidity of his mind overcame the shortcomings of his hearing. We spoke on the global balance of power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For Kissinger, reaching order, maintaining order, and keeping order was the paramount challenge. He sounded obsessed with the concept of order. I asked him whether he was planning to write a book. He told me that he already had, and it would be published in a few months. When he pronounced its title I burst out laughing: *World Order*.

With such an anecdotal background, I was among the first and avid readers of that magisterial book. The only part of the globe to which Henry Kissinger could not offer any resolution in the context of the existing problems, and helplessly surrendered to uncertainty, was the Middle East. Nonetheless, I had never seen a description of the region like the one proposed by Kissinger with such acumen and literary talent. Here it is:

The Middle East has been the chrysalis of the world's greatest religions. From its stern landscape have issued conquerors and prophets holding aloft banners of universal aspirations. Across its seemingly limitless horizons, empires have been established and fallen; absolute rulers have proclaimed themselves the embodiment of all power, only to disappear as if they had been mirages. Here every form of domestic and international order existed, and been rejected, at one time or another.

The world has become accustomed to calls from the Middle East urging the overthrow of regional and world order in the service of a universal vision. A profusion of prophetic absolutisms has been the hallmark of a region suspended between a dream of its former glory and its contemporary inability to unify around common principles of domestic and international legitimacy. Nowhere is the challenge of international order more complex—in terms of both organizing regional order and ensuring the compatibility of that order with peace and stability in the rest of the world.

In our time, the Middle East seems destined to experiment with all of its historical experiences simultaneously—empire, holy war, foreign domination,

a sectarian war of all against all—before it arrives (if it ever does) at a settled concept of international order. Until it does so, the region will remain pulled alternately toward joining the world community and struggling against it.⁴

I am not sure if I can cap Kissinger’s prose; I believe he has said the last word here.

Musing on last lines in a delightful *Weekly Standard* post, Alice B. Lloyd opened dozens of tomes to the final page to uncover the secret of the perfect ending:

Some of the best-remembered last lines are unpredictable and inconclusive. The famous ones have a way of leaving things unresolved. Which makes sense: Whatever they actually say, last lines carry the memory of everything that came before. . . . They may leave you with no idea of what’s next—or they may simply act as though there’s no end in sight. . . . Anyway, all of this is to say that the best last lines aren’t endings at all. And, really, would anyone want them to be?⁵

After all, tomorrow is another day.

This is truly the last line, the end of *Turkey’s Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds*, with no ending at all. . . .

NOTES

1. Feroz Ahmad, *Turkey, The Quest for Identity*, Revised Edition (London: Oneworld Publications, 2014), 211–12.
2. Tavernese, “Turkish Leader Erdogan Making New Enemies and Frustrating Old Friends.”
3. Hüseyin Besli and Ömer Özbay, *Bir Liderin Doğuşu, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan* [The birth of a leader], 111st edition (Yeni Türkiye Yayınları [New Turkey Publications], March 2014), 194.
4. Henry Kissinger, *World Order: Reflection on the Character of Nations and the Course of History*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2014), 96–97.
5. Alice B. Lloyd, “Last Lines,” *Weekly Standard*, December 14, 2018.

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I must admit that I was fortunate having Carol Ross, as my native English editor. Her share in this book is tremendous, to say the least.

Prof. Eugene Rogan, the director of the Middle East Centre at the University of Oxford, but more importantly, one of the best historians of his

generation in the world, was so generous to write a foreword. He also gave invaluable advice regarding the structure and the language of the book. I feel humbled for his contribution.

I am also delighted that Ramazan Öztürk, a Turkish national with a strong Kurdish identity, and a photographer with an international reputation, provided me the cover image. Halabja massacre of 1988, a genocidal act of Saddam regime in Iraq that thousands of Kurds were gassed and lost their lives, had come to the attention of the world thanks to his undaunted lenses. I shared with him unforgettable memories in Central Asia, Caucasus, and Moscow during the heyday of the collapse of Soviet Union, as well as in Turkey's Kurdish southeast, during the 1990s, its unhappiest period. Our paths crossed once again thanks to his contribution to my book. It had to be.

My special thanks go to three people I have never met in person. I knew who they were. Prof. Michael Mehrdad Izady, a big name of social sciences, especially regarding the history and the culture of the Kurds, possessing a unique, internationally acclaimed cartography, was prompt and generous in presenting me the usage of his maps. So was Dr. Fabrice Balanche, one of the most brilliant specialists in the geopolitics of Syria and the Middle East. I tracked him for a long time to ask his permission to use his maps in the book. Whenever I was able to reach him, he was swift in his warm response. Thomas McClure of Rojava Information Center based in northeastern Syria was under the most tragic circumstances of the war situation, on that night of October 9 (2019) when I had reached him. He was ready to help in providing any map I would ask from them. The precious contribution of each to this book is highly appreciated.

Without the selfless assistance of my dear young friend Dr. Erdi Öztürk who did not spare any moment for this book that has always been there whenever he was needed, notwithstanding he was in Strasbourg, France, Birmingham and London, Britain, or Indiana, the United States, and without his critical contribution, it would be very difficult for you to hold this book in your hands, now. The words in my vocabulary cannot suffice to express my gratitude to him. I, also, cannot neglect to express my gratitude to Associate Professor Bahar Başer. She was so low profile and very humble but always omnipresent during the writing and put her utmost effort for this book to get close to perfection as much as it could while she was about to bring into life a perfect girl.

I am, as always, grateful to my wife who encouraged me to write this book and endured the dark and cold days in Sweden that was contrary to her Mediterranean nature. She was solid as a rock standing behind me, giving the urge and the comfort that enabled me to take the challenge and bring the book to completion. I wrote some parts of this book in Berlin where my nucleus

family lives. They presented me the hospitality and the affection needed for writing the book in their domicile. I am forever indebted to them.

More than anyone and everything, I am indebted to my only and most beloved granddaughter, who was born in Berlin and was almost two years old when I started writing this book. The boundless love I feel for her was the primary reason to leave my country. I could not afford to take the risk of not being able to see her while she was growing up, the risk posed by staying in a merciless and autocratic Turkey. She, naturally, does not have the slightest idea of the role she played in my life, or of who I am, what my past is, what I have done and why. Likewise, as I was writing *Turkey's Mission Impossible: War and Peace with the Kurds* in front of her in Berlin, she had no idea what I was doing, and she was trying her best to communicate with me. I reckon and hope that she will reach the twenty-second century, and probably the world I have lived in will look irrelevant to her. Perhaps, the problems I have encountered will as well.

I hope so.

Timeline—Late Ottoman and Modern History of Turkey

- 1876—Abdülhamid II, the role model of Turkey's current president Tayyip Erdoğan, is enthroned on August 31. First constitution of the Ottoman Empire announced on December 23.
- 1877—March 19 parliament convened. Russia declared war against the Ottoman Empire.
- 1878—February, Sultan Abdülhamid shelved the constitution and disbanded the parliament. His autocratic rule is established. March, the Treaty of San Stefano ended the war forcing the Ottoman State to make major territorial concessions. August, Berlin Congress convened. With the intervention of the British diplomacy, Treaty of San Stefano revised.
- 1908—The Young Turk Revolution led by Ittihad-Terakki (Committee of Union and Progress). The military mutiny in Macedonia followed by the declaration of Freedom, Equality, and Justice in Salonica. Sultan Abdülhamid conceded the demands of the Young Turks and announced the restoration of the constitution and the parliament on July 24.
- 1909—Abortive counter-revolution of March 31 (April 13 in the Gregorian calendar) designed to destroy the CUP. Sultan Abdülhamid deposed by the Unionists that suppressed the counter-revolution with the support of the troops under their control that came from Salonica. Abdülhamid forced to exile in Salonica.
- 1912—Balkan War. The European heartland of the Ottoman Empire is lost with its second largest city Salonica.
- 1913—Unionists seize power on January 23 and establish a single-party rule, first of its kind in Europe in the twentieth century until 1918.
- 1914—On October 26, Ottoman Empire entered in World War I in alliance with Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Bulgaria, against Britain, France, Russia, and Italy.

- 1915—Extermination of the Ottoman Armenian population according to the plan developed by Talât Pasha, the strongman of the Unionist rule.
- 1916—Sykes-Picot (and Sazanov) secret agreement signed to partition the Ottoman Empire among England, France, and Russia.
- 1918—Ottomans sign armistice with Britain.
- 1919—Greek Army invades İzmir (Smyrna).
- 1919—General Mustafa Kemal initiates the National Struggle in Eastern Anatolia.
- 1920—İstanbul parliament meets for the last time on March 18. İstanbul occupied by British and French troops. On April 23, Grand National Assembly of the National Struggle opens in Ankara, electing Mustafa Kemal as president. August 10, Treaty of Sèvres partitioning Asia Minor and envisaging an independent Kurdish state signed. Nationalists rejected it and it is never enforced.
- 1922—On September 9, Nationalist forces enter İzmir, marking the total defeat of the invading Greek Army. On November 1, Grand National Assembly in Ankara abolishes the Sultanate. The last Ottoman Sultan Vahdettin flees İstanbul on a British warship.
- 1923—On July 24, Treaty of Lausanne signed and considered as the legal foundation of the Turkish state. On October 13, Ankara is declared as the capital of the new Turkey. On October 29, the Republic of Turkey proclaimed, and Mustafa Kemal elected president.
- 1923–1924—Population exchange. According to Lausanne, around 500,000 predominantly ethnic-Turkish Muslim inhabitants of Greece are exchanged with almost 1 million 200 thousand Greek Orthodox population of Asia Minor. It has been the biggest population exchange recorded until that date. Only the Muslims of Western Thrace in Greece and the Orthodox Greeks of İstanbul were exempted from the massive population exchange. Nevertheless, the Greeks of İstanbul, due to pogroms in 1955 and the because of the conflict on Cyprus between Turkey and Greece gradually emigrated and only 2,000–3,000 left in their native İstanbul currently. After the foundation of the Republic of Turkey, the Greek Orthodox population of İstanbul was almost one-fourth of the country’s most populous city.
- 1924—On March 3, Caliphate abolished and Ottoman family exiled.
- 1928—On April 9, reference to Islam as “religion of the state” removed from constitution. On August 9, the Latin alphabet adopted, severing the Republic from its cultural and intellectual heritage of the Ottoman times.
- 1932—Turkey joins the League of Nations and rejoins the Western world.
- 1934—On June 26, Law required Turkish citizens to take surnames. On November 26, Grand National Assembly bestows the name Atatürk (“Father Turk”) upon Mustafa Kemal.

- 1938—On November 10, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk dies. On November 11, İsmet İnönü voted in unanimously as president. Following İnönü's inauguration, Atatürk is hailed as the "Eternal Leader" (Ebedî Şef), and his successor as the "National Leader" (Millî Şef).
- 1939–1945—The Second World War—Turkey formally remains neutral.
- 1946—The formation of Democrat Party (DP) by a breakaway group of the CHP. CHP was considered the continuation of the Committee of Union and Progress in the Republican period and introduced one-party rule from 1923 on.
- 1947—On March 12, Truman Doctrine declared that the United States promises support for Turkey and Greece against Soviet subversion. Turkey enters the Cold War.
- 1950—On May 14, DP wins an overwhelming victory in the general election, ending the one-party rule of the CHP under Atatürk and İnönü since 1923.
- 1952—Turkey and Greece join NATO. Turkey sends troops to take part in the Korean War.
- 1955—On February 24, Baghdad Pact signed between Iraq and Turkey; later joined by Iran, Pakistan and Britain. It is replaced in 1958 by CENTO (Central Treaty Organization) when the overthrow of the monarchy in Iraq ended it.
- 1959—July 31, Turkey applies to the European Economic Community (later to be EU) for membership.
- 1960—On May 27, military coup overthrows DP. A year later, on September 17, the deposed Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, Foreign Minister Fatin Rüştü Zorlu, and Finance Minister Hasan Polatkan are hanged in the İmralı island where the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan would serve his life imprisonment from 1999 on. DP is banned. Many of its parliamentarians are condemned to prison terms at different levels.
- 1961—A new, relatively liberal constitution which is drafted by expert academics accepted by National Unity Committee, the ruling military junta. Elections held on 28 October leads to a series of unstable coalition governments.
- 1963—The Ankara Agreement between Turkey and the European Economic Community signed.
- 1965—Justice Party considered the continuation of the banned DP wins an overwhelming electoral victory. Its leader Süleyman Demirel, a civil engineer who was a prominent public servant during the DP rule, forms the government.
- 1971—On March 12, the Chief-of-Staff and the top commanders present a memorandum to Prime Minister Demirel and force him to resign. They take over the reins of government. Turkey is ruled by a coalition of the

- CHP and Justice Party (AP) coalition government defined as “above-party” cabinets until the elections in the year 1973.
- 1973—In the general elections, no party wins a majority, after a long period of bargaining Bülent Ecevit’s CHP and Necmettin Erbakan’s Islamist MSP (National Salvation Party) formed a coalition government. Islamists shared political power for the first time.
- 1974—Turkish Armed Forces intervenes to Cyprus to protect the Turkish minority following a rightist coup in the island.
- 1977—Following the general elections, Demirel returns to government as the head of a nationalist coalition composed of his center-right AP, Islamist MSP, and the ultra-nationalist MHP.
- 1978—On November 27, in a secret meeting in the village of Fis of Lice district of Diyarbakır in Eastern Turkey, the PKK is founded. Abdullah Öcalan elected as the leader of the clandestine group. He left Turkey in 1979 for Syria.
- 1980—On September 12, military top brass seizes power, ousting Demirel, putting him in detention with his arch-rival Ecevit. Turkey put under the rule of the military junta called itself National Security Council. All political parties are banned.
- 1981–1982—The Constituent Assembly set up by the generals wrote a new and authoritarian constitution. The authoritarian constitution is adopted in a referendum.
- 1983—The general elections that the generals restricted only for three new parties to participate unexpectedly won by Turgut Özal’s ANAP (Motherland Party), the least predicted one to win, with a safe majority. The Özal era of Turkish political life commenced. Özal transformed Turkey radically by adopting free-market policies.
- 1984—August 15, the PKK begins its armed insurgency in Turkey.
- 1987—Turkey formally applies to the EU for full membership.
- 1988—Turkey received Iraqi Kurdish refugees fleeing from Saddam Hussein’s genocidal campaigns following the Halabja massacre where he used chemical weapons. Özal overcame the resistance of the military leaders in accepting Kurdish refugees into Turkey.
- 1989—On October 31, Turgut Özal elected eighth president by the parliament after General Kenan Evren, the leader of the military junta expired.
- 1990–1991—Iraq invades Kuwait, triggering an international crisis. Özal joins President Bush’s coalition against Saddam regime in Iraq, closing the pipeline boosts the UN sanctions. Predicting Saddam’s ultimate downfall, he established close relations with Kurdish opposition leaders in Iraq, thereby breaking a taboo of Turkish Republican era.
- 1993—President Turgut Özal dies of heart attack at the age of sixty-six before the termination of his mandate. Süleyman Demirel, his one-time sponsor and later political nemesis, replaces him.

- 1994—Erbakan's Islamist Welfare (Refah) Party in a strong showing for municipal elections wins İstanbul and Ankara, the capital. RP's İstanbul branch chief Tayyip Erdoğan becomes mayor of İstanbul at the age of thirty-nine.
- 1996—Customs union agreement signed with the EU, marking a major transformation in Turkey's economic policy toward globalization. On June 29, Erbakan becomes the first Islamist prime minister in a coalition government formed with the DYP of Ms. Tansu Çiller who replaced Demirel.
- 1997—On February 28, the National Security Council where the military establishment interferes in policy-making forces the removal of Erbakan government on the allegations of violating the secularist foundational principles of the Republic.
- 1998—Constitutional Court orders the dissolution of the RP bans Erbakan for five years from politics. Islamists form the Virtue (Fazilet) Party to replace the RP. The mayor of İstanbul, Tayyip Erdoğan, removed from his post and sent to prison for a few months for inciting religious hatred in a speech.
- 1998—October. The PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan expelled from Syria where he was based since 1979 under Turkey's pressure and began his odyssey that took him to Moscow, Athens, Rome, and finally to Nairobi, Kenya where Turkish operatives captured him.
- 1999—February 15, the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, brought to Turkey after his capture in Nairobi, Kenya thanks to the cooperation of the American intelligence. He is imprisoned in the İmralı Island in the Marmara Sea, in the proximity of İstanbul.
- 1999—On June 29, Abdullah Öcalan is sentenced to death at the end of his trial. His verdict commuted into aggravated life imprisonment when Turkey abolished capital punishment from its legal system in its bid for the EU membership.
- 1999—The Helsinki Summit of the EU declared Turkey as a candidate country for integration on the same par with the rest of the candidate countries. It invites Turkey to abide by the Copenhagen Criteria to start accession talks.
- 2001—Constitutional Court dissolves the Virtue (Fazilet) Party.
- 2001—On June 21, Erbakan loyalists form the Felicity (Saadet) Party.
- 2001—On August 14, the reformist wing of the Virtue (Fazilet) Party parts ways with Erbakan and his loyalists and form the AKP under the leadership of Tayyip Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül.
- 2002—On November 1, the general elections brought the AKP to power with 34.3 percent of the ballot and 363 seats, allowing it to form a single-party government for the first time since 1987. No other parties apart from the CHP could manage to clear the 10 percent national electoral threshold, 34.4 percent support enabled the AKP to control the parliament disproportionately. Because the party chairman Tayyip Erdoğan was banned to run in the elections, the AKP government formed by Abdullah Gül.

- 2003—On March 9, Tayyip Erdoğan elected to parliament in a by-election after his ban lifted. Abdullah Gül resigned on March 11, to enable Erdoğan to take over the post of prime minister. Gül became the foreign minister.
- 2004—On December 17, The Brussels Summit of the EU decided to start the accession talks with Turkey in the year 2005.
- 2005—Norwegian prime minister Bondavik, by Turkish prime minister Tayyip Erdoğan's endorsement, initiates secret contacts with the PKK aimed to resolve the Kurdish conflict.
- 2007—Crisis for the election of the president. The military and the parties backed by it stood against the AKP's nominee Abdullah Gül because his wife carries a headscarf on the allegation that it would be a violation of the secularist principles of the Republic for the highest post once occupied by Kemal Atatürk. The early elections held to overcome the crisis gave 47 percent electoral support to the AKP. Abdullah Gül elected president in August. The constitution amended for electing the president through a popular vote.
- 2007, November 1—First face-to-face contacts between the high-level PKK figures and Turkish intelligence officials entrusted by Erdoğan in Brussels.
- 2008, September—Oslo Secret Talks began in the Norwegian capital between the PKK and the Turkish delegation consisted of intelligence officials. They would meet eleven times around the negotiation table until June 2011. The two belligerents met four times during 2009, three times in 2010, three times in 2011 in Oslo, and once in 2010 in Brussels. Hakan Fidan, who would become the head of Turkish intelligence in 2010, took part in Oslo at the fifth meeting in 2009 as the personal representative of Prime Minister Erdoğan.
- 2011—The general elections in June presented 50 percent support for the AKP. Tayyip Erdoğan consolidated his rule with a new and strong mandate.
- 2011-July—The fighting between the Turkish government forces and the PKK resumed, the peace efforts collapsed, and the secret peace talks at Oslo terminated.
- 2012, December—Erdoğan announced the peace process regarding the Kurdish issue, centered on the talks with the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan at İmralı prison island.
- 2013—At the end of May, the protests of the urban youth in the center of İstanbul that initially began for environmental reasons grew and spread across Turkey, constituting the biggest challenge against Erdoğan rule until that day. They are brutally suppressed by the security forces after two weeks.
- 2013—On December 17 and 24, a probe on charges of corruption began that led to the resignation of three ministers of Erdoğan government close

to the leader. The close to the accusations involved Erdoğan's household and blamed by Erdoğan as a coup attempt by Gülenists embedded in the security establishment and judiciary to oust him. A relentless purge of Gülenists unleashed in the judiciary and the police. An intense power struggle between the two allegedly moderate Islamists groups who were close allies set in motion irrevocably.

2014—On August 14, Tayyip Erdoğan becomes the first popularly elected President of Turkey in history. He starts a campaign for amending the constitution for an executive presidential system.

2015—On June 7, in the general elections, the AKP lost its parliamentary majority for the first time. The pro-Kurdish party HDP (Peoples' Democracy Party) for the first time gets over the high electoral threshold put into preventing its representation in the Turkish parliament with an impressive 13 + percent. Eighty people from the HDP elected to the parliament rendering Erdoğan's plans impossible for the constitutional amendments he envisages.

July 2015—Turkish fighter jets, following a long interval, began pounding the PKK bases in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The Peace Process with the Kurds formally ended.

2015—On November 1, after Erdoğan blocking the formation of a new government and thanks the leader of the ultra-nationalist MHP's Devlet Bahçeli allying with the AKP, the snap elections that the president forced gave him the majority in the parliament he was seeking. The AKP led once again by 50 percent electoral support.

2016—On July 15, the alleged military coup attempt blamed on Erdoğan's erstwhile Islamist allies Fethullah Gülen and his loyalists triggered an unprecedented suppression of dissent in Turkey. On July 20, state of emergency declared and remained in effect for two years. Tens of thousands of civil servants and the military personnel are purged. The freedom of expression and press suspended. Scores of most prominent journalists and academics put into prisons on flimsy charges and convicted by heavy penalties. The co-chairs of the pro-Kurdish HDP and some members of parliament who took part in the peace process between 2013 and 2015 also imprisoned.

2017—On April 16, the referendum on the proposed constitutional amendments proposed by Erdoğan to provide him extraordinary powers resulted with 51.4 percent approval amid the allegations of rigging.

2018—On June 24, presidential and general elections held on the same day, Tayyip Erdoğan elected president in the first round with 52.6 percent. Turkey entered into a new era with a sui generis presidential system without a prime minister that extraordinary executive powers bestowed to the president.

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