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Many actors involved into one problem: International powers, regional powers, Turkey and Kurds in the Middle East

The emergence of the XX century and especially 1915, has been marked in the world calendar as a very important year, not only for being one of the years during which the World War I took place, but also for being a period in the world history which is full of ethnic tensions and nationalistic uprisings, which at the end gave way to the dissolution of 3 important Empires, including the Ottoman one. The Ottoman Empire therefore, the former-great power now devastated and nicknamed as “Sick man of Europe” had lost its brightness and was trying to survive in this new emerging order. However, its broken pieces started to create themselves new dynamics for survival. This was the case for mostly, the Western part of the Empire, in which the Balkans created their independent states even though nationalistic feelings were still persistent and present and tensions continued to exist within countries. However, the same did not happen with the Eastern part of the Empire. The Armenian and the Kurdish populations have been very problematic in relation to the central authority but also in relation to each other as well. The Turkish-Armenian-Kurdish triangle seems to encompass problematic dynamics, but in contrast to the Armenian one, the Kurdish question is more related to the discipline of International Relations and the Political Science because the Kurdish population is located mainly in 4 Middle East countries; Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria and in contrast to the Armenian population again, they were not accepted as a distinct “millet” in the “millet system” of Ottoman Empire. Therefore, they were not able to create their own nation-state but remained separated into 4 countries even though today they count around 30 million.

The Kurdish question in the Middle East has always been part of discussions in international arena and has attracted the attention of many academics to research and write on the topic. Especially after the emergence of the Arab Spring, Islamic State and refugee crisis in Syria, the Kurdish population has come to a very important actor key in Syria and Turkey especially. *Therefore, this paper tries to identify and analyze the Kurdish population in the Middle East, their relations to the main regional actors, Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, as well as define the status and*

position of regional and international powers, such as Russian Federation and United States and the impact of their policies in the Middle East region. Most importantly, this paper tries to find out how to bring Turkey to a game-changer position in the region, especially after the Kurdish organizations (formal or informal) are being seen as a golden key for resolving the strictly rising and widening Islamic State threat in Middle East and beyond.

Taking account from the geographical characteristics of the region, it is easy to state and understand that the Kurdish people in Syria and in Turkey are really interconnected to each-other for the very reason that they lie tight along the same border. The Kurdish Turkish relations have been in increasing tension, even though in 2009 the Justice and Development Party (AKP) undertook some reforms which were supposedly intending to improve the relations in between, and in overall the conflict has been epitomized by the PKK-Turkey problems which escalated even more in the summer of 2015 because of the new developments of Kurdish regions in Syria, such as the rise of PYD (which is the political wing of Kurdish population in Syria) and the effectiveness PYD has shown to organize its supposedly, military wing, YPG.

All these happenings and development in the Syrian region has been counted from the Turkish side as a threat for its national security. Turkey's main concern in this scenario stands in the fact that PYD which is a Kurdish political organization has close ties to PKK which Turkey and many other western countries have accepted as a terrorist organization. PYD has been playing a very important and prominent role, especially during the past year in terms of the government of autonomous regime and in fighting with the ISIS troops. Turkey on the other hand, does not seem to expect these developments with a lot of support because increasing influence and partnership of PYD means increased influence of PKK and PKK's power as a regional actor. At the light of all these happenings and developments, I can assume that official Ankara might be afraid of possible increasing influence of PKK in the region which may end up in an increasing pressure from PKK to the Turkish government for extending the rights and freedoms of the Kurdish population in Turkish territories. Maybe for this reason, Ankara is seen as unwilling to cooperate with the PYD not only because it is seen as the political wing of YPG (military character of Kurdish organization in Syrian territories) but also for being near ideologically to the PKK.

On the other hand, the Kurdish population in Syria, especially after the Turkish-Syrian relations started to worsen, has been accusing the Turkish government of attacking them for the last 3 years, after the happening in Rojava out broken.

Another actor that has been closely involved with the Kurdish Syrian conflict is that of Kurdistan Region of Iraq. It is officially known as the Kurdistan Region and located in the north of Iraq it is an autonomous region, ruled by Mesoud Barzani. The Turkish relations with Barzani's autonomous region have usually been cooperative and friendly, especially in the AKP rule period, the then Prime Minister, Erdogan, made several meeting with Barzani.

The reason behind that, is that Barzani as well is not very fond of PKK and PYD and he in that regard supports AKP's policies regarding the Kurdish population in Turkey, because it is in his benefit not to have a competition in the region from the PYD/PKK. However, the KRG's first important action with respect to the emerging Syrian conflict was the support it gave to the Kurdish opposition in Syria in 2011. This gathered political parties except PYD and influence the KRG's position among the Kurdish population located in Syria. However, it is seen that lately the relations between PYD and KRG are improved, after the ISIS emergence in the region.

Moreover, if we analyze the situation in the international dimension, the most important and remarkable development in this scenario is the increasing international legitimacy of the PYD in the scope of past year. PYD has been part of several meeting worldwide in this period and important countries such as France, UK have been giving positive signals to the recognition of PYD in international level. This integration of PYD in international level will have some positive effects in the engagement of the Kurdish population in Syrian politics firstly, and in increasing the influence and bettering the position of the Kurdish population in the region of Middle East as well.

In the context of our class however, the most important implication of the increasing influence of PYD in the international arena as a new emerging actor, is foremost in disadvantage of the Turkish international policy and domestic politics as well. Turkey's attitude towards the PYD increasing influence has been very radical, in domestic and international channels, and the Prime Minister Davutogulu together with the President Erdogan have stated that they will not allow the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish region in the Syrian border, as they argue it is going to be a threat for destabilizing the domestic politics of Republic of Turkey.

There is actually a way for the Turkish attitude to change, only in case the relations between Turkey and PKK achieve to make a progress in the peace process, opening process, or democratization process as it is usually referred to in the academic literature.

All in all, we see that the Kurdish population in Syria has been very lonely and it did not have any actual ally so that it could increase its influence. This has made the Kurdish population of Syria not fight for their nationalistic values and be more passive in terms of actions and deeds, as compared to Kurdish population in Turkey or in Iraq. However, the emergence of the Arab Spring and the outbreak happenings in Syria, throughout the help of PYD as a representative wing of the Kurdish interests in Syria, and most importantly the growing and widening threat of Islamic State in Syrian and Iraqi lands, increased the presence of the international actors in the region.

Russia on the other hand, emerged as an actor in Syrian war, with the excuse of the being part of the international taken attacks towards the Islamic State. The question that would lie behind this action, before Turkey shot the Russian military aircraft, would be *“How can Russia benefit in Syria by creating ties with the Kurds, without breaking or damaging its relations with its most important Middle East partner, Turkey”*. However, that is no longer the case. Russia can now easily support and help the Kurdish population and Kurdish community in Syria not as a revenge towards the Turkish side, but because it does not have to worry anymore of benefiting from the Kurdish population of Syria without having Turkey worry about it, as the relations have already reached a tension because of the Russian military aircraft.

What I see in this scenario is a transformation though, of the Turkish International Policy, from a “Zero Problem” into a “Precious Loneliness”. I would argue that the Turkish foreign policy has been a failure the last decade, especially the effects and outcomes of which are seen in the last 5 years, after the emergence of the Arab Spring, civil wars in countries of the region, de-stability in the relations between countries and lastly the emergence of the Islamic State as a threat.

Russia on the other hand, might have been pushing its limits, starting from the Crimean annexation which happened 2 years ago. We can easily see that Russia is eager to have more influence in the Mediterranean and having good relations with Kurdish population in Syria and helping them become more influential in Syrian politics in a near future and use the Kurdish population in there for its own benefits.

However, what is important in all these, is that Turkey has to provide a new policy towards its neighbors in the region, otherwise it will be forced to accept at least a part of the demands of

PKK in case the PYD/YPG/Russia triangle manage to be the most influential actor in the Northern Syrian territories.

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