

Ethnicity is not a Primary Cause of Conflict but Conflicts may become Ethnic

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1. Abstract

To what extent do we understand the term ethnicity? Why few of the ethnic conflicts become a theatre of genocidal warfare? Who are the people engaged in ethnic conflicts and why do they do it? Why ethnic conflicts cause brutal violence in a state? Why the people belonging to ethnic groups support the cause of violence? Why is it becoming difficult for the international organizations and the Non-Governmental Organizations to settle ethnic conflicts which are causing havoc at the regional level with repercussions at the global level? These are a few of the burning issues.

One of the challenging questions for contemporary societies has been the recognition of cultural differences and the governance over diversity. (Hakan Yavuz, 1998) Dichotomizing and categorizing complex communities by the leaders of the state leads to conflict and violence which in turn results in lack of effective management and diversity. This certainly is prominent in those nation-states which hold multi-ethnic groups.

In this following essay, I would look up to questions mentioned above through the Kurdish conundrum taking into account the cultural, religious, political, and economic perspectives. I shall also analyse the community turmoil involving the issue of Kurdish identity that has led to an ethnic conflict. Why is Kurdish community stateless, will also be discussed with a focus on Kurds in Turkey.

2. Introduction

According to Anthony Smith, "Ethnic groups are a group of people who define themselves as distinct from other groups because of cultural differences. These cultural differences can arise from a number

of sources, and the most important seems to be language, religion, shared historical experience, geographical isolation, race and kinship, a sense of solidarity and an association with the specific territory which it may or may not be in possession". Ethnicity thus relates to the social groups where the people identify with each other on presumed common genealogy, shared history, common language, similar geographical region, distinctive culture and religion.

Though one can claim that neither ethnicity nor the idea of nationalism in itself causes ethnic conflicts, however, ab-initio seemingly inconspicuous conflicts within the States may escalate and take the form of ethnic clashes. The battle lines are then drawn on the basis of ethnicity. Ethnic clashes result in violence, fiasco, mayhem and eventually chaos. The examples in contemporary history abound. To cite a few, ethnic conflicts in India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Zaire, Guyana, Balkans, Rwanda, Chechnya, Darfur and a score of other countries are proofs enough of the fault lines in the human race and how these manifest in form of varying degrees of violence and disarray. Ethnic conflicts have a wide spectrum of manifestation, at one end is the non-acceptance of legitimate political, social, cultural and economic concerns of deprived ethnic groups by the State; peaceful protests by the people, whereas at the other end, the oppressive policies of State to stymie the flaring of agendas of ethnic communities may result into state- sponsored terrorism, human right violations, and sheer violence in form of ethnic cleansing.

'Ethnicity is not the ultimate, irreducible source of violent conflict in such cases". (Rogers, Brubaker and Laitin, David D. 1998). Violence does not spontaneously erupt between otherwise peacefully coexisting ethnic groups. The hunger for power and authority, gaining of political mileage and leveraging the economic benefit in one's favour are normally the strong reasons to choose confrontation and aggression over compromise between the various ethnic groups and the State. Strong, staunch and aggressive ethnic moorings inevitably lead to conflict situations that may lead to ethnic clashes. Ethnic clashes may be considered a zero-sum-game with little room for cooperation and compromise.

Since 1945, the issue of ethnic conflicts has been neglected by many of the standard tenants of international relations. It was believed that with the nation-building process, the issue of ethnic conflicts will come to an end and the minorities will get accommodated in the political system of the State all across the world. In 1972, Walker Connor in an article entitled "Nation Building or Nation Destroying?" argued that it was wide off the mark to treat ethnicity as an ephemeral nuisance and cautioned against the optimism of the nation builders. From the beginning of the cold war, the study of international relations revolved around two ideologies, capitalism and socialism. There was not much mention of the ideology of ethnicity. Later it was realised that there was a rise in ethnic conflicts between 1975-1980 as mentioned in the Library of Congress by John Burton. In total, there were 116 entries. In a study published in 1972, Walker Corner claimed that of 132 States studied, only 12 were essentially homogeneous from an ethnic point of view.

According to Robert Kaplan's book "Balkan Ghosts", the people had been killing each other in tribal and religious wars for centuries. But the reality is that most ethnic conflicts are expressions of "modern hate" and large products of the 20th century. The notion with ethnic groups is that some ethnic groups prefer separation and others prefer to stay within the existing state boundaries with compromise and dispensations given.

In this following piece of work, I will highlight why Kurdish identity in the Middle Eastern region has always been ignored, and the simmering of the feeling of alienation eventually triggered an ethnic conflict. Further with my viewpoint, I would also make an analysis as to how this long-trodden conflict be resolved? Though resolving the challenges which are faced by Kurds means challenging the status quo.

3. Are Ethnic Differences The Only Root Cause of Violence Among Groups?

Decolonization period of the 20th century set the ethnic conflicts on a high rise. The States that looked for autonomy from the provincial forces were not in every case entirely illustrative of all ethnic gatherings in their regions. After gaining independence and with the departure of colonizers, the conflicts arose with the question "with whom the power of the State belonged"? As some groups moved to succeed to the power of the former colonialists, others were heard to claim that self-determination was still incomplete, for they had not achieved their own independence (Horowitz, 1985). In an enormous number of ex-colonial nations, the freedom offered a route to the ethnic uproar. The Rwanda genocide is a glaring example wherein the ethnic differences were non-existing initially but in the power struggle, conflicts took the ethnic turn followed by genocide of primarily the Tutsis as also of moderate Hutu.

In Rwanda, ethnographers and historians always believed that Hutus and Tutsis were not distinct ethnic groups as they shared the same language, culture and institutions. It was only under Belgian colonialism when these two groups were divided. In 1959, the Belgian policy assisted the Hutus to control the government via universal elections in the post-independence era. The Hutus launched an onslaught on Tutsis and forced them to flee to Uganda and Tanzania. Tutsis over the years created a power base in Uganda and commenced attacks on Hutu dominated places in Rwanda from 1986 onward. On April 6, 1994, the plane carrying Rwanda President Juvenal Habyarimana was shot down that triggered the genocidal killings the next day onward. Hutu were provoked to kill Tutsis and the soldiers started killing moderate Hutu and influential Tutsis in the political circle to deter anyone to gain political control. Tutsis were particularly targeted and exterminated. The reign of violence including rapes, killings, maiming and arson against the Tutsis and moderate Hutus was unleashed. About 70% of Tutsis were executed and a million of Rwanda population was wiped out. After about 100 days of genocide, the Rwandan Patriotic Force (RPF) comprising exiled Tutsis marched into Rwanda and gained control and forced Hutu militants to run to neighbouring country, Zaire. RPF then commenced re-building Rwanda.

The UN Peacekeeping Force deployed at Rwanda at that time miserably failed to ensure peace and rather was witness to genocide. The common belief that the acts of genocide are done by the monsters and psychopath is untrue as the common people under special circumstances are led astray and commit such acts and that was what happened in Rwanda. Post-genocide, the government took several actions to promote amity between different factions and facilitate the healing process. Presently, the government does not keep records of ethnic groups and encourage people to get rid of ethnic titles.

4. Kurdish Conundrum

Kurds are a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-racial group. Their lack of independent sovereign government has led them into self-doubt as in which part they reside given the fact that they are divided among countries in middle east i.e. Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq. One may arrive at a question then, that what the basis of an ethnic identity?

Shah Muhammed Raza Pahlavi referred to Kurds as “the purest of all Aryans, and one of the most noblest races of the Middle East”. Kurds hold a pseudo-identity. All the states where they reside have done all they could to stop the growth of Kurdish society as a distinct and separate national entity and often destroyed its distinctions altogether.

Kurds are in minority in all the sovereign states where they live today. “Kurds is a kind of dream: an ancient one that floats across cities and valleys, through crumbling souls and oil fields, stretched across four nations”. (Dreams of Kurdistan: Onyi ego, Michael; K.C. Mackenzie)

5. Background of Kurds

For more than a thousand years, the bulk of the Kurds defied invasion or assimilation with the three main populations threatening them: the Turkish Ottomans, the Persians, and the Arabs. Regional Kurdish leaders - Aghas, Mirs, Baigs, Shaikhs, however, often recognised the power and battled in the name of neighbouring states' laws.

Kurdish people speak an Indo-European language, there are several dialects and sub-dialects. Kirmanji is the most dominant dialect, which is spoken in Turkey. Sorani is mostly spoken in Iraq. Sub-dialects of Sorani are Kirmanshahi, Gorani, and Leki. Zaza is spoken in Central Anatolia by Alevi Kurds. (Yavuz, Hakan, 2007) The total Kurdish population is estimated at about 30 million, spread primarily in four states, Turkey (12 million), Iraq (6 million), Iran (6 million) and Syria (2-3 million). Regional, cultural, theological and institutional differences have created internal diversities and overlapping political ties.

Kurds are separated predominantly by language from their neighbours. Dialectical variations advocate against ethnic origin in common sense. The Kurds are also split by religious beliefs. The overwhelming majority are Sunni of Shafii faith, a version of Islam which is not widely practised in this region by others. Nonetheless, large divisive impulses come into play at the level of customs of tribal groups and adherence to spiritual orders. The Kurds seem overwhelmingly attracted to different dervish society and unorthodox Islamic sects.

6. Pursuit of Sovereignty by Kurds

Kurdish identity is not a singular identity. It is a product of intermingling of local and global communities. The Kurds are one of the Middle East's main Fertile Crescent's native people. Their irredentist claims of territory refer to areas of South-eastern Turkey (Northern Kurdistan), Northern Syria (Western Kurdistan), Northern Iraq (Southern Kurdistan) and North-western Iran (Eastern Kurdistan). They strive for justice and autonomous region with a sovereign government. This re-examination of the nation-state for Kurds in middle east in the Fertile Crescent raises layers of conflicting and overlapping socio-political situations.

Among the Kurdish people, there has been a disunity in language, religious behaviour, and especially tribal structure. As part of their nationalist campaigns, in recent years, Kurds have been involved in a sustained effort to elevate Kurmanji to the status of Kurdish language by using it in all their broadcast, propaganda material, and other official communications (Van Bruiness, 1998). Increasing influence of digital communication tools and the visibility of some forms of media have given this plan a good chance of success in overcoming some of the Kurdish community's semantic hurdles.

During, 1497-1918, Middle East was divided into two parts, one led by Persian Empire and the other by Ottoman Empire. The conflict between them was always the heartland of Kurdistan. Kurdish patriotism blended during the 1890s when the Ottoman Empire was at the end of its life. At the end of World War I, the Treaty of Sevres (1920) forced a settlement and guaranteed autonomy to Kurds. The Treaty which dismantled the defeated Ottoman Empire, clearly recognized this in Section III 62-64, that provides for creation of a Kurdish state on the Kurdish territories. Article 64 reads as follows:-

“If within one year from the coming into force of the present Treaty of the Kurdish people within the areas defined in Article 62 (comprising western Kurdistan) 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 desires independence from Turkey, and if the council then considered that these people are capable of such independence and recommends that it should be granted to them, Turkey hereby agrees to execute such recommendations, and to renounce all the rights and title over these areas.

The detailed provinces for such renunciations will form the subject of a separate agreement between the principal Allied Powers and Turkey. If and when such renunciations take place, no objection will be raised by principal Allied Powers to the voluntary adherence to such an independent Kurdish state of the Kurds inhabiting that part of Kurdish which has hitherto included in the Mosul Vilayet”.

However, besides the Treaty, the formation of Kurdish nation was prevented. There were two factors thereto, one was the absence of credible, worldly statesman with Kurds, the other, Turkish leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk who three years later destroyed their hopes. The Treaty of Lausanne (1923) recognised Turkish sovereignty within its new borders carved out of Ottoman Empire, however, isolated Kurds among the new countries of the Middle East.

The Kurdish population's main characteristic in terms of ethnic, religious and linguistic association has been its internal diversity whereas Kurdish nationalism is a phenomenon of the growth of the twentieth century, Kurdish cultural identity is much older than Kurdish nationalism. In the present context and on the European model, the concept of a nation-state was, until the nineteenth century, more or less unknown in the middle east.

5. Kurds in Turkey

The Turkish Republic was established out of the ashes of the Ottoman Empire in 1923 and was recognised by the Lausanne Treaty by Kemal Atatürk's actions and his supporters. Approximately half of all Kurds lived in Turkey. Some Kurds were drawn to the Turkish nationalist dream of creating a society in which Turks and Kurds had equal standing at the beginning of the 1920s. Yet freedom was an independent idea from the Turkish point of view: Kurds were forced to integrate into Turkish society; their distinct heritage was dismissed. When the last vestige of Ottoman rule, the caliphate, was abolished in March 1924, “all public vestiges of separate Kurdish identity were crushed. Kurdish schools, associations, publications, religious fraternities and teaching foundations were all banned (McDowall, *The Kurds*, p.36).

As part of the effort to create a unitary Turkish country and state, the independent nationality of Kurds was rejected. The Kurds demanded separation from Turkey to create an independent Kurdistan or to have autonomy and greater political rights, however both could not be an option agreeable to Turkey. It sowed the seeds for an organisation that masters the art of guerrilla warfare, the PKK (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan – Kurdistan Workers Party) in 1977 that began armed violence in 1984. (*Barkey and Fuller, 1998; McDowall, 1997*).

Youth today speak of continuing discrimination: “I have lived with Turks for as long I can remember....when I was young, without even knowing what being Turkish or Kurdish was, we were

looked down upon. They called us names I dare not repeat....when it came to schools there was segregation everywhere between Kurds and Turks. The teachers would just make it obvious....we could never understand why they treated us in that way.” (Voices from Kurdistan, p.11)

In Turkey, the leaders have always denied the very existence of the Kurdish identity. If Turkey wants to be a regional power, it needs to adopt a multi-ethnic identity and has to get away with the Kemalist ideology. Also, if Turkey wants the state to be stable, it needs to consider both Islamic and Ottoman legacy into account. Kurdish insurgency in Turkey has been referred to as a nationalist movement.

The Kurdish side has been more active in adapting its strategies to the dynamics of the post-cold war and has widened its supporter base in Europe to include progressive political parties, humanitarian organizations, and even some governments. However, this support has failed to gain any mileage to Kurds. The Kurdish side has also been reluctant to drop its communism and class struggle rhetoric entirely. As a result, their doctrine has remained at least as immovable as that of the Turkish state and military for most of the past 20 years.

Turkish President Turgut Ozil made significant symbolic gestures to the Kurds in 1990-91 in reaction to external demands and growing concern in Turkey over the spill over of rebellions in Iraqi Kurdistan. He expressed sensitively about their situation, admitted meeting with Iraqi Kurdish rulers as also approved public references to Kurds. However, right wing politicians and many Turkish military officials were vehemently opposed to these arrangements.

Since 1983, the PKK has been using guerrilla and brutal tactics for their liberation. They got trained in Becca Valley, Lebanon and base areas of Iraqi Kurdistan. It escalated its assaults and raids on state forces in Turkey's Kurdish regions in 1991 and 1992. This effort prompted retaliatory attacks by soldiers and police, many of them indiscriminately against the Kurds. The ideologies which both these groups follow are rigid in nature, and are equally adamant that even the slightest indication of compromise can only be perceived as a weakness and should be castigated.

Also, by fleeing across the frontier to independent Iraqi Kurdistan, several PKK militants tried to escape Turkish reprisals. Turkish troops resorted to intense ground and air assaults in early 1992 attacks that were sometimes indiscriminate, targeting both Iraqi Kurdish towns and PKK centres. The regional government of Iraqi Kurdistan waged a month-long war with the PKK in October, facing tension from both the PKK and the Turkish government, eventually mitigating its protected areas. In these sessions, the PKK was hurt badly enough that its members ordered a ceasefire agreement during March 1993 and started peace talks with the Turkish government.

If Turkey is, as is currently said to be, one of the two (admittedly imperfect) democracies in the Middle East, then its democratic system could have already found a way to integrate its Kurdish inhabitants demands and wishes by standard representational procedures.

The Kurdish -Turkey conflict seems to be of intractable nature. The Kurds consider the struggle between the Turkish state and the Kurdish rebels as a national liberation struggle. Whereas, public perception in Turkey has become increasingly pessimistic and cynical over the reasons given by the Turkish and Kurdish media for the escalation of the Kurdish war in recent years. Significant number of people across the socio-political spectrum have come to accept that this conflict is becoming unresolvable, not just because of the magnitude of Kurdish patriotism and nationalism or the unprincipled nature of their attacks, but also because of the massive corruption which has now infiltrated the state, the army and also the PKK.

Regarding all such indicators, the Kurdish forces never have decided to move much further than arranging infrequent skirmishes in their brawl towards the Turkish state.

An article in *Son Posta* dated 11th April 1946 echoed the establishment view, "In Turkey no Kurdish minority ever existed either nomadic or settled, with national consciousness or without it".

Turkey's response to the tricky issue of Kurdish rights or self-determination has taken a new sense of desperation, propelled by a number of factors. Recently, the Turkish army has initiated two stages of 'Operation Claw' into Northern Iraq sending aircraft, tanks, drones and armoured vehicles battling against strongholds of the PKK. In early 2018, Turkish troops and Arab allies launched 'Operation Olive Branch' in Northern Syria's largely Kurdish city of Afrin, impoverishing more than 5,000 Kurdish people and engaging in systematic human rights abuses against the Kurdish community and the destruction and degradation of Kurdish cultural sites.

Recent Turkish-Kurdish Problem

Turkey's 'Kurdish question' for President Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) is also becoming an electoral problem. Initially responding to the Kurds, AKP was generally denying the malignant anti-Kurdish hostility that infected Turkish politics for a long time. After the attempted coup against Erdogan in 2016, however, Kurdish parties became caught up in the reaction of the regime. About 100 Kurdish cultural institutions and associations, media organisations, and language institutes were closed down in one week.

The 2017 Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government sponsored independence referendum which resulted in an overwhelming vote for independence, has also made Ankara intolerant of any Kurdish claims to

autonomy or self-determination in neighbouring countries. Ankara recognises that the 25-30 million Kurds scattering across Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Armenia have largely been split along cultural, financial, and ethnic lines, and successive administrations in Ankara have been quite adept at playing against each other in various Kurdish communities.

Turkey would also be vigilant to signals that Kurdish parties all across the country are already attempting to work together in ways they had not done in the past. Kurdish solidarity presents a serious threat to Turkish stability by threatening the Turkish state's territorial integrity.

7. Conclusion

The dangers posed by Kurdish secessionism and the possibility that external forces, especially in the West, are plotting to challenge the territorial sovereignty of Turkey has caused more instability than peace-building. As one assumes, the more interference by the third party, the more the tension grows.

The divide between Turkish nationalism and Kurdish nationalism has turned the area into an ethnic conflict. That means that the violence is not only due to differences between ethnic groups, Kurds and Turks but there are several other political factors leading to conflicts.

Henry J. Barkey aptly demonstrates that exclusion of the Kurds from political processes has already created more problems than it has solved. Presently, Kurdish unity is predominantly championed by Kurds who live in the West or elsewhere beyond the core area. Kurdish student organisations are advocating the establishment of a shared ethnic identity in Europe and the United States. Characteristically, the United Nations has declined to come out in favour of breaking up Kurds from their current place to an independent state.

With the conflict which resides in the region, one can come down to a conclusion that there is no solution to Kurdish ethnic conflict, but the atrocities require a proper management from the four states where Kurdish population resides i.e. Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Recognition of Kurdish identity among the people has not died, rather it has taken a full course over the period of time with the new socio-political processes and also with the depletion of energy resources in the world there has been an urge and competition among superpowers for the control. Furthermore, although severe ethnic Kurdish violence now appears to be a thing of the past, socio-economic disparities and cultural traditions will mean that the Kurds have motivations to assert themselves as one of the major ethnic group which has been living in the region for ages. There seems to be no doubt that the intensity of their recognition drive will vary in different states of their residence.

Considering Turkey's attitudes towards political opposition, international opinion can be the most successful weapon against the implementation of such legislation into the new constitution – initiatives that not only annihilate resistance but also allow the ethnocide of Kurds in Turkey ever more efficient. The repeated deprivation of the human rights of the Kurdistan Region has led to the conclusion that independence is Kurdistan's only feasible option.

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