

External Pressure and Turkish Discourse on 'Kurdish/Democratic Initiative'

İnan Rüma*
Dilaver Arıkan Açar**

Abstract

This article aims at the analysis of the reactions to the external influence within the framework of the recent "Kurdish Initiative" through the discourses of important representatives of different political viewpoints in the Turkish press. As the content of the "Initiative" was not presented to the public by the government, public discussion has been shaped by subjective understandings, including the columnists who began to define the problem and the solution, as well as the scope of the "Initiative", by themselves according to their specific political positions. Although finding a solution to stop the PKK violence as well as improving the conditions of the citizens with Kurdish origin have always been a concern on Turkey's agenda, the specific timing of the "Initiative" raised questions about whether it is exposed to implicit foreign pressure for the initiation of the process. The apparent unpreparedness of the government to bring about any concrete framework seems to support the claims about external involvement and pressure, which is consistently denied by the government. Although a clear tendency for adapting new policies and approaches in line with international intellectual influence to handle the problems of Turkey is shared by most commentators except for the nationalist left and right, specific interstate-level attempts to be involved in the "Kurdish Initiative" is not welcomed by all.

Keywords

Kurdish Question, External Pressure, Nation-State, Separatism, Ethnic Conflict

*İnan Rüma, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of International Relations, İstanbul Bilgi University, İstanbul, Turkey.

**Dilaver Arıkan Açar, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of International Relations, Yaşar University, İstanbul, Turkey.

Introduction

There have often been serious discussions about the external dimension of the so-called “Kurdish Question” in Turkey. These discussions revolve around sources and causes of the support to the Kurdish nationalist movements in Turkey and attempts to change the character of the Turkish state. The sources that are argued vary from regional to international actors and the reasons of their involvement are based on different motivations from dividing Turkey in order to create an independent Kurdistan in Southeastern Anatolia or merging it with the North of Iraq to create the “Greater Kurdistan”, to transforming Turkey in line with the changes in the global system, and to liberalise the country.

The so-called “Kurdish Question” entered a new phase in the summer of 2009. Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party, the Kurdish nationalist paramilitary/terrorist organisation) declared that he would announce a roadmap for peace in mid-August 2009. This was followed by the Turkish Prime Minister (PM) and the leader of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s statements on the necessity of a solution to the “Kurdish Question”.¹ This resulted in the introduction of the so-called “Kurdish Initiative”² by the Turkish government, which is said to be a comprehensive peace plan that will satisfy the demands of Turkish citizens of Kurdish origin and put an end to the fighting by the demilitarisation of the PKK. It is often argued that the process has started with the American pressure due to American president Obama’s plan of withdrawal of troops from Iraq. This triggered a discussion on the external influence on the domestic affairs of Turkey in relation to one of its long-lasting problems.

¹“Turkey PM aims to end PKK fight”, *BBC News*, 14 August 2009, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/europe/8201641.stm>>.

²The “Kurdish Initiative” or the “Democratic Initiative” are originally called respectively as “Kürt Açılımı” and “Demokratik Açılım” in Turkish. The literal synonym for the word “açılım” is “opening” and the concepts basically refer to an opening indeed implying a new phase for the resolution of the problem.

This article aims at the analysis of the reactions to this external influence regarding the “Kurdish Initiative” through the discourse and perceptions of important representatives of different political viewpoints in the Turkish press. It seems reasonable to assume that the views expressed serve to indicate important themes in relation to the country’s political culture. Within this framework, it is argued in this article that the reactions to the external influence can be analyzed at two levels; the actor level, that is to say the interstate level, and the intellectual aspect of the international systemic level. In this sense, it seems productive to distinguish the external influence as part of interstate relations and as part of a general intellectual framework. In this context, a number of themes appear in the analysis of the role of the external influence regarding the “Kurdish Initiative”.

“To catch up with the contemporary world” and “to be strong and hence not be needy of or influenced by external intervention”, are the two basic themes that are often mentioned by the columnists in question. More elaborately, Turkish opinion, as represented by various columnists, seem more or less united on the idea that contemporary international standards must be applied in order to create a strong Turkey that will not be subject to external intervention at the inter-state level. In other words, it can be argued that the Turkish opinion reflected in the opinions of the leading columnists is favouring international intellectual influence in order to decrease the inter-state influence.

Surprisingly, there is no serious reaction to external influence as was the case in the “recognition of Armenian Genocide”.³ The reasons for this note-worthy situation could not solely be limited to the differences between Kurds and Armenians or between the two problems, nor could it be interpreted solely in relation to the

³For an analysis, please refer to Dilaver Arıkan Aar and İnan Rūma, “External Pressure and Turkish Discourse on ‘the Recognition of Armenian Genocide’”, *Journal of Southeastern Europe and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 7 (2007), pp. 449-465.

relatively less intense level of direct foreign involvement in the issue as well as the broader international and regional circumstances. In any case, this is beyond the scope of this article. In this article, we will first present the standpoints of the columnists on the “Kurdish Initiative” then elaborate on various themes concerning the external influence regarding this initiative.

Standpoints towards the “Kurdish Initiative”

It can be observed that the central concern for all columnists has been finding a solution to the “Kurdish question” and putting an end to the fighting. The hopes of the initial stages have been overshadowed by the later developments and actions of the government, as well as of the PKK and the Kurdish nationalist political party, Democratic Society Party (DTP), that sounded like the political arm of the PKK in Turkish politics and the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA).

Liberal authors in the press are very much excited and impressed with the idea of the “Kurdish Initiative”. They basically perceive the process as an important step in the overall transformation of the Turkish nation-state that they see as primarily responsible for almost all existing problems of Turkey. Mehmet Altan, a university professor of economics and well-known liberal journalist, considered the “Initiative”, from its initial phases onwards, as an essential part of the democratisation process of the Republic. Solving the Kurdish problem would further help the dissolution of the “First Republic”, which he claims is represented by a coalition of a civil-military bureaucracy, and thereby transfer political power to the people under a new democratic understanding.

Similarly pragmatic and liberal, the experienced columnist Cengiz Çandar, a well networked journalist who has followed the Kurdish issue for a long time and was one of the 12 liberal intellectuals who were consulted by the government on this issue, perceives the “Kurdish Initiative” as part of the democratisation of Turkey through the re-integration of the Kurds to the Turkish

state.⁴ The issue for Çandar is ensuring that the Kurds to keep on living in the geography that they have been living for ages with their identity as citizens of the Republic of Turkey under the protection of the rule of law according to the EU's norms. Accordingly, this process, which will grant Kurds the freedom to live with their own identity and which will result in the ending of violence, signifies an important paradigm shift in the discourse of Turkish unity.⁵ Çandar considers the enhancement of cultural and individual rights for the Kurds to be central in this overall process as well as creating a space for Kurdish politics to express itself in a legitimate way without resorting to violence.⁶

Zülfü Livaneli, who defines himself as a humanist artist, and who has been a well-known social-democrat politician, argued for the peace and supported the "Initiative" in order to stop the fighting and the deaths.⁷ In this framework, Livaneli complains about what he calls "leftist conservatism" that is detached from ordinary people by dreaming about an idealised world and criticises all around destructively. He further states that even the Islamists who have been socialised in closed circles make an effort to integrate themselves with the world, while those who come from a leftist-internationalist tradition are highly introvert.⁸

On the part of the opponents, Mümtaz Soysal, who is a well respected professor of Constitutional Law and politician, is considered to be one of the leading figures of the "leftist nationalists". Since the introduction of the "Kurdish Initiative" to the public, he holds a very sceptical and critical stance towards the idea and the way it has been tried to be implemented as a policy by the government. He bases his opposition on two basic grounds;

⁴Cengiz Çandar, "Türkiye'de Kürtler: Asimilasyonun İflasından Reentegrasyona", *Radikal*, 23 August 2009.

⁵Cengiz Çandar, "Kürtleri Kürt olarak yaşatma sorunu", *Radikal*, 30 August 2009.

⁶Cengiz Çandar, "Nasıl bir 'Kürt açılımı'? (2)", *Radikal*, 25 July 2009.

⁷Zülfü Livaneli, "Barışın düşmanı çoktur", *Vatan*, 20 August 2009.

⁸Zülfü Livaneli, "Sol Anahtarı", *Vatan*, 19 August 2009.

firstly he claims that the whole process is not the Turkish government's idea; he claims rather that it was planned outside of Turkey, specifically by the US in line with its policies regarding withdrawal from Iraq. Secondly, he questions the terminology of the process; in particular, he regards the phrase "initiative" ("*açılım*") as a concession and a *carte blanche* in itself given by the government to the parties that continue terrorism.⁹ Soysal also notes that it would be hard to oppose the idea of the "Kurdish Initiative" as at first glance it rightly addresses peace and reconciliation desires as well as providing a prospect for the long awaited stopping of the flow of blood that would attract people's attention and support. However, he remains critical as to the possible harm that he anticipates would ensue for the people in the long run.¹⁰

On the other side of the political spectrum, Altemur Kılıç is one of the leading columnists of the nationalist right with strong reference to the "Turkishness" of the Turkish state. In this context, Kılıç considers the process of the "Kurdish Initiative" as a step forward in the attempts to divide Turkey and undermine "the concept of the Turkish nation".¹¹ He establishes a link between the outside forces that are playing a "grand game" and the PKK that both aim to establish "Greater Kurdistan".¹² Kılıç also links the timing of the introduction of the "Kurdish Initiative" and the US withdrawal from Iraq. He suspects that the developments in Turkey related to the Kurdish issue are part of an overarching American plan to keep its back secure while withdrawing from Iraq. He also claims that there are various precedents for mistrusting the US, which does not exclusively necessitate the need to come up with concrete evidence for the existence of such a

⁹Mümtaz Soysal, "Açılıma Katılım", *Cumhuriyet*, 12 August 2009.

¹⁰Mümtaz Soysal, "Tiyatro", *Cumhuriyet*, 21 October 2009.

¹¹Altemur Kılıç, "Türk barışı mı, APO/PKK barışı mı?", *Yeniçağ*, 13 August 2009.

¹²*Idem.*, Altemur Kılıç, "Büyük Kürdistan'a hoş geldiniz", *Yeniçağ*, 01 November 2009.

plan.¹³ Nevertheless, Kılıç insists that the “Kurdish Initiative” is indeed an American initiative and project.¹⁴

The role of the government has been also a matter of discussion. Taha Akyol, who defines himself as a liberal although he is also known for his nationalist-conservative past, claims that associating the idea of the “Kurdish Initiative” with the current government is wrong. Akyol clarifies that there were other governments and political parties that attempted at such policies and that he supported all of them.¹⁵ The “Initiative” should not be seen as a betrayal as some Turkish nationalists argued; if this policy can be properly implemented, it will increase the loyalty of the citizens to Turkey who are sensitive on their Kurdish identity.¹⁶ Following the later rather negative developments in the process, Akyol argues that the public support for the “Initiative” has decreased and this has become a serious impediment for the government.¹⁷

Contrarily, leftist intellectual and academician Nuray Mert argues that the ruling AKP has been the only party that is present in the totality of the country since the opposition parties, certainly except for the DTP, are absent in the Southeastern Anatolia where the Kurds live predominantly and the armed fights took place. AKP’s initiative power in the Kurdish question has been based on such legitimacy. However, its absolutist actions in general and in the particular case of “Kurdish Initiative” in the later stages, damaged this democratic legitimacy.¹⁸ The AKP government does not seem to be convincing in its search for partners in this process since it has always been distanced to the idea of consensus with

¹³Altemur Kılıç, “Cinler tepemize çıkıyor!”, *Yeniçağ*, 25 August 2009.

¹⁴Altemur Kılıç, “‘Açılımların’ talimatı Washington’dan...”, *Yeniçağ*, 03 September 2009.

¹⁵Taha Akyol, “Hangi Açılım”, *Milliyet*, 15 August 2009.

¹⁶Taha Akyol, “Açılım İhanet mi”, *Milliyet*, 14 August 2009.

¹⁷Taha Akyol, “İktidarın Açılım Sıkıntısı”, *Milliyet*, 04 November 2009.

¹⁸Nuray Mert, “Kürt meselesi ve iktidar”, *Radikal*, 27 October 2009.

the other political parties and has not paid attention to increasing cooperation in political decision-making.¹⁹

A similar disappointment is expressed by the Islamist intellectual Ali Bulaç. Bulaç argues that the religious democratic circles could and should contribute to the “Kurdish Initiative”. However, the AKP government drafted the outline of the “Initiative” with 12 liberal intellectuals who are close to itself and religious intellectuals have not been included. The role of the liberal intellectuals is undeniable according to Bulaç, yet Islam should have also been the reference point, that is to say, all problems and demands cannot be reduced to a liberal discourse.

The Contending Definitions of “Problem”, “Solution” and “Initiative”

One can observe clear differences in the columnists’ definition of the problem, and hence, the solutions that they proposed. Nuray Mert argues that the departure point of those who represented the Kurds politically was independence. According to Mert, the Marxist discourse that used to be dominant in the Kurdish movement is no longer valid. However, its substitute is far from being clear as well. She claims that neglecting the fact that the Kurdish movement has been envisioning independence as a goal and violence as a means to this end, constitutes a major problem; therefore, the “negotiations”, as this term gradually came into use in the “Initiative”, cannot be analyzed solely within the framework of democratisation.²⁰

Mert further states that the problem that Turkey faces is not a problem of terror; it is rather an ‘armed political struggle’. At this stage, the Kurdish political movement has the position that requires a negotiation. It is perilous to define and present this colossal process as “democratisation” since it will increase already

¹⁹Nuray Mert, “‘Açılım’ değil, ‘kamuoyu çalışması’”, *Radikal*, 11 August 2009.

²⁰*Idem*.

very powerful doubts and block the process. According to Mert, by proposing democratisation solely based on individual rights as the ultimate solution to the Kurdish question, the democrats in Turkey deliberately neglect other demands; and neglecting these demands is not likely to present an outcome both for the opposition and the democrats.²¹

In the same manner, Ali Bulaç argues that the separatist movements in countries such as Britain and Spain cannot be compared to the Kurdish movement in Turkey, on the grounds that these are essentially political organisations. They applied violence because they could not make their demands accepted through politics. Therefore, when Britain and Spain negotiated with their particular separatist movements, they negotiated with the politicians. The case of the PKK is the opposite; the PKK started with the abolishment of all other Kurdish movements and then let the political parties that it controlled take the ground.²²

Ali Bulaç contemplates explicitly on the opportunities that are provided by Islam in the solution of Kurdish question. Bulaç argues that all three; Turkish nationalist, Kurdish nationalist and right-conservative, understandings of religion are completely false and irrelevant to Islam. In his attempt of forming a non-western sociology, “nation” is not a quantitative but a qualitative phenomenon; related to belief and religion. He claims that the term “people of Turkey” is a collective term; it also includes the non-Muslims. The ethnic and religious differences are the result of God’s will. Both as a co-religious fraternal community and as a separate ethnic group, Kurds must have the following rights: recognition of their identity and end to assimilation or denial policies, freedom of language and socio-economic improvements and welfare.²³

²¹Nuray Mert, “Kürt açılımına genel bakışım”, *Radikal*, 20 August 2009.

²²Ali Bulaç, “Öcalan Faktörü”, *Zaman*, 23 December 2009.

²³Ali Bulaç, “Kavimlerin ve Kürtlerin Hakları”, *Zaman*, 02 September 2009.

Mümtaz Soysal approaches the issue from a national independence and socio-economic development perspective instead of focusing on ethnic rights and freedoms. In this framework, he supports the idea of changing the “shameful social structural remnants of the middle ages” as well as increasing public investments realizing this change in the southeast and northeast parts of Turkey.²⁴ Soysal criticises “Kurdish nationalism” from the points of its relations with feudality, racism and foreign support. From his perspective Kurdish nationalism as well as the Kurdish leadership with their association to feudal structures, could not constitute the features of nationalism that have the capacity to lead the Kurdish people.²⁵ According to Soysal, the needs of the people of this region are as follows: dealing with the unequal distribution of wealth, realizing land reform, planned development strategies and employment-creating industrialisation.²⁶

Altemur Kılıç attributes the rift that has been tried to be created between the Turks and the Kurds, which he sees as a “fight between brothers”, to a scenario scripted by the foreigners. Although he admits that there might have been some extreme measures taken by the state against the Kurds, he considers these as actions adapted to lead the Kurds to be integrated into “Turkishness” after 17 rebellions. Kılıç puts forward the idea that there have never been problems that prevent the Kurds from rising to the highest posts or becoming successful businessmen. He raises the question of how that “magical” harmony is spoiled and suggests overcoming the rift between the Turks and the Kurds by restoring the old brotherhood between the two people.²⁷

In the following stages of the process, opinions differed yet again. According to Nuray Mert, what could address both the objections of the opposition parties and the violent attacks of the

²⁴Mümtaz Soysal, “Tehlike ve Beklenti”, *Cumhuriyet*, 14 August 2009; Mümtaz Soysal, “Hayret ve Gayret”, *Cumhuriyet*, 02 September 2009.

²⁵Mümtaz Soysal, “Gerçek Açılım Susamışlığı”, *Cumhuriyet*, 19 December 2009.

²⁶Mümtaz Soysal, “Tiyatro”, *Cumhuriyet*, 21 October 2009.

²⁷Altemur Kılıç, “Türkler-Kürtler”, *Yeniçağ*, 26 November 2009.

PKK that supposedly aim to harm the process, would be the formation of a new social consensus on the Kurdish question. However, the government implements a new form of authoritarianism: although, previously, mentioning the existence of the Kurds was considered a betrayal, now it has turned into disagreeing with the government on the Kurdish question.²⁸ The society is moving from one vein of authoritarian propaganda to another, and the smooth functioning of democracy does not seem likely under these conditions.²⁹ Within this framework, she deplores the neglect of the plight of workers even when they die in archaic mines, and the primacy of identity politics that also includes the Kurdish question.³⁰ The whole process is completely unproductive because, as she thinks, nobody considers what others feel and say, the government, the opposition and the Kurds.³¹

According to Mert, the discourse on the Kurdish initiative should be drafted carefully and in a refined way, based on principles. She observes that both support and opposition stems from unconditional surrender to fellows. As such, this initiative has no chance to survive.³² The government has an authoritarian approach both in the content and style of the “Kurdish Initiative” and this approach is not related to the ideal of democratisation. In this way, Mert argues, this “Initiative” has been getting “nationalised” and has become a state project and this is a democratic deficit.³³

The attitude of the Kurdish nationalist DTP in the “Initiative” process has also been a matter of discussion. Following the closure of the Kurdish nationalist DTP by the Constitutional

²⁸Nuray Mert, “Ergenekon gölgesinde 'demokratikleşme' (1)”, *Radikal*, 22 December 2009.

²⁹*Idem*.

³⁰Nuray Mert, “Laf çok, vicdan yok!”, *Radikal*, 17 December 2009.

³¹Nuray Mert, “Sancılı Süreç”, *Radikal*, 15 December 2009.

³²Nuray Mert, “İzmir”, *Radikal*, 01 December 2009.

³³Nuray Mert, “Bir 'devlet projesi' olarak Kürt açılımı”, *Radikal*, 24 November 2009.

Court, Nuray Mert observed that the reaction of this party against the decision was not based on a general democratisation process where the political party closing would be out of agenda, but was based rather on a conflictual behaviour of threatening through declaring the perils of closing the DTP. Mert claims that this conflictual attitude of the DTP could signify the internationalisation of the Kurdish question, which would form yet another vicious circle like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She notes with explicit worries that this would endanger the future of Turkey, including the Kurds. She further notes that the democratic intellectuals who have not questioned the deficiencies of the Kurdish nationalist movement implicitly buttressed this danger.³⁴ In the same manner, Ali Bulaç observes that violence aggravates the Kurdish question; the Kurdish people are also very tired and the human geography of the region has been destroyed.³⁵

The behaviour of the DTP, particularly the welcome ceremony that it organised for the surrender of some PKK militants, provoked a serious reaction in Turkish society. Within this framework, Ali Bulaç observed that the Kurdish question was transformed from a political question into a social one and found this development worrying. Bulaç claimed that the “amnesty” to former PKK members should have been the last step, but the AKP government initiated this wrong move as a result of external pressures. In this respect, he criticised once again the fact that Islamic people and groups have been excluded from the process, while Islam is the strongest unifying force.³⁶

Bulaç further claims that the new initiative has resulted in social rifts and hostilities. Although there are no religious or sectarian fights in Turkish history according to his claims, he makes clear that there is no guarantee that this will not take place. He bases this claim on the fact that Islam is not the reference of people in Turkey, contrary to what is often thought. Islam is

³⁴Nuray Mert, “Kürt İntifadası’nın eşğinde”, *Radikal*, 08 December 2009.

³⁵Ali Bulaç, “DTP’den sonra”, *Zaman*, 12 December 2009.

³⁶Ali Bulaç, “Açılım’dan Ayrışma’ya”, *Zaman*, 26 October 2009.

becoming the “religious ritual” and “folkloric fantasy” of a conservative culture and political identity. Therefore, Bulaç argues, people who do not understand the world with traditional and religious codes, could easily kill each other as a result of external provocations. In this sense, the Kurdish question ultimately concerns Turkish society as a whole: those who remain outside of the position of the government, the state, the US and the EU that seem active in the “Initiative”, must be also considered.³⁷

According to Mehmet Altan the “Kurdish Question” cannot be solved by denying the existence of Turkey’s Kurds and by getting involved with the policies oriented on the axis of “Washington-Ankara-Baghdad” or just removing the PKK foothold from Iraq. He considers the PKK as a “consequence” of the “Kurdish Question” not a “reason” in itself.³⁸ Thus if Turkey had approached the PKK issue through the “Kurdish Question” instead of addressing the “Kurdish Question” through the PKK, Altan believes that Turkey would have been in a far better position than it is now. Altan regards the PKK as a product of the “Kemalist state’s logic”. Thus, if in a way the Turkish state had not created the Kurdish problem then PKK would not have been such a problem in a “democratic republic” within the EU standards. In this sense, he argues that the solution to the “Kurdish Question” would emerge when the Kurdish issue itself would be given priority and the Kurdish people began to be taken as the party to deal with, thus making the Turkish state these people’s state as well.³⁹ The solution to the “Kurdish Question” will be reached when Turkey decides to become the state of the “Turkey’s Kurds” releasing itself from any relevant complexes⁴⁰ and this could be

³⁷Ali Bulaç, “Kürt Açılımı’nın Orijinal Nüshası”, *Zaman*, 05 August 2009.

³⁸Mehmet Altan, “PKK ‘neden’ mi, ‘sonuç’ mu?”, *Star*, 13 August 2009. Altan argues that the Turkish republic is not formed by a nation but instead the Turkish state build up a “nation” which regarded all the remanants of the peoples of the Ottoman Empire with various ethnic identities, as “Turkish” over their Muslimhood.

³⁹Mehmet Altan, “Beyaz Saray’dan DTP’ye”, *Star*, 06 August 2009.

⁴⁰Mehmet Altan, “Keşke Baykal’ı da yanımda götürseydim”, *Star*, 13 October 2009.

done by turning the already politicised and militarised issue into a humanitarian one.⁴¹

Cengiz Çandar considers the solution of the two problems to be vital for success in the Kurdish initiative. Firstly, he recognises the persuasion of the Turks as the majority of the population as vital but not enough. Surely a strong support from a majority that is convinced of the benefits of the solution would ease the tension and help the process. But this could not be enough for the solution if the “critical mass” of the Kurds is not satisfied with the path to follow and the final product of the solution. Unless the Kurds that are directly party to the problem are satisfied, he takes into account the possibility of turning the “Initiative” into a fiasco.⁴²

Çandar observes that the Kurdish problem and the PKK problem are not the same; however, he argues that they are closely related and hard to separate. The Kurdish problem is not a product or consequence of the PKK; on the contrary, the PKK is a by-product of the Kurdish issue; though Çandar believes that, at this critical juncture, it is getting harder and less realistic to separate the two; indeed, according to Çandar, the PKK represents the violent dimension of the Kurdish problem.⁴³ Çandar argues that he has been supporting the idea that Abdullah Öcalan and the PKK should be taken not as a “party to the conflict” but as a “part of the solution”; in this regard, he claims that they have to be involved in the process.⁴⁴ After the PKK’s violent attacks that stalled the Kurdish initiative, Çandar reads the PKK’s reaction to the process that its leadership see as a means for their liquidation as a “sign of weakness” rather than a “show of force”. Thus in

⁴¹Mehmet Altan, “Apo’nun hücresi”, *Star*, 06 December 2009.

⁴²Cengiz Çandar, “‘Kürtler’in tatmin olması, ‘Türkler’in ikna olması’”, *Radikal*, 06 December 2009.

⁴³Cengiz Çandar, “Abdullah Öcalan’ın ‘yol haritası’na doğru...”, *Radikal*, 22 July 2009.

⁴⁴Cengiz Çandar, “Bağdat’ta ‘Mezopotamya Birliği’nden Silopi ‘Barış Grupları’na...”, *Radikal*, 18 October 2009.

order to extricate the Kurdish issue from violence, the persistence of the “Democratic Initiative”, which would eventually marginalise the PKK and its policy of insistence on reaching a solution via means of violence, is essential. On the other hand, quitting or fully revising the Kurdish initiative would play in the hands of people who are supporting the violence.⁴⁵

Within this framework, he stresses that the closing down of the DTP as well as police operations against other political entities related to the PKK like the KCK (Kurdish Democratic Confederation) lead to the disappearance of a viable political platform for the Kurds to represent themselves. On the contrary, these incidents limit the options of the desperate Kurdish youth who might be tempted to join the PKK – initiating what Çandar calls a process of “spiritual disengagement from Turkey”⁴⁶ - while at the same time discouraging the PKK cadres who might leave the armed struggle for political participation. He draws parallels between the Sinn Fein-IRA and KCK-PKK and claims that the “Democratic Initiative” cannot succeed if it repeats the theme of “fighting against terrorism”, while the British could only succeed in disarming the IRA by making it part of the process instead of thinking of crushing the IRA by crushing the Sinn Fein.⁴⁷ In this sense, the problem of the PKK and the finding a way out of violence remains as the Gordian Knot for the Turkish state.⁴⁸

Mümtaz Soysal personally appeared on the public agenda with his proposal of a “definite solution” to the Kurdish problem. He argued in his column that the proponents of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey are aiming to establish their own independent state by separation and this could not be tolerated.

⁴⁵Cengiz Çandar, “PKK provakasyonuna yüksek sesle karşı koymak...”, *Radikal*, 06 December 2009.

⁴⁶Cengiz Çandar, “Açılım: Nereye doğru? Nasıl?”, *Radikal*, 18 December 2009.

⁴⁷Cengiz Çandar, “Sinn Fein’i yok ederek IRA’yı halletmek: Halledin halledebiliyorsanız”, *Radikal*, 26 December 2009.

⁴⁸Cengiz Çandar, “Kürt sorunu: Türk devletinin ‘Gordion düğümü’...”, *Radikal*, 26 July 2009.

While admitting the fact that Turkey could not prevent the establishment of a Kurdish state in Northern Iraq, Soysal argues that Turkey ought to tolerate and even economically support the new entity in return for an agreement on the exchange of the Kurdish populations in Turkey (who do not want to live without regional autonomy or education in languages other than the official one, which conflicts with the notion of nation-state) with the Turcoman population in Iraq.⁴⁹ Although recognising the hardships caused by previous population exchanges and migrations (e.g., the population exchange between Turkey and Greece and the migrations from the Balkans and the Caucasus), he finds it necessary for the survival of the Republic. Despite being regarded as a marginal idea, the article attracted so much criticism especially from the liberals for its content and particularly for the title which recalls the Nazi label for the “‘final solution’ to the Jewish Question”.⁵⁰ Despite later admitting in an interview that “maybe the title of the article was wrong”, he maintained his position about not granting ethnic rights and protecting constitutional citizenship.⁵¹ He also criticised “liberals converted from the left” for ignoring the fact that supporting ethnicity and ethnic group rights would fall within the circles of “micro-nationalism” which is in clash with what could be regarded as the classical understanding of the “left” and would not lead to the solution of the “Kurdish Question”.⁵²

Altemur Kılıç perceives the real motivation behind “the Kurdish Initiative” as the intention to divide Turkey in order to establish “Greater Kurdistan”. Kılıç believes that foreigners have attempted to accomplish this end since the establishment of the Turkish Republic, when it was faced with Kurdish insurgencies, as

⁴⁹Mümtaz Soysal, “Kesin Çözüm”, *Cumhuriyet*, 17 August 2009.

⁵⁰Cengiz Çandar, “Türk-Kürt veya Türkiye baharı”, *Radikal*, 21 December 2009.

⁵¹“Soysal: Zorla alıkoyacak değiliz”, *Akşam*, 07 September 2009. The Turkish citizenship is defined in the constitution (Article 66) as “Everyone bound to the Turkish state through the bond of citizenship is a Turk”.

⁵²Mümtaz Soysal, “Saçılım”, *Cumhuriyet*, 22 August 2009.

well as today as issues of “identity-language-education-QWX”⁵³ are brought to the agenda.⁵⁴ Kılıç considers the US as the primary actor in this process. He claims that the US has a long and disreputable track record of not only *not* fighting against the PKK, but on the contrary providing support and, until recently, preventing Turkey from resorting to military operations against the PKK.⁵⁵ He also links the “Kurdish Initiative” and the “Armenian Initiative”, which addresses the problems between Turkey and Armenia, as the two plans which have been put into practice in line with American policies, and which he insists are not be in Turkey’s best interests.⁵⁶

Kılıç sees the attacks in the process against the Turkish security forces as the indications of the *de facto* end of the “Kurdish Initiative” which he terms “the Rubicon of Turkey”. He argues that from this point on there should be no turning back until the “disabling of the last terrorist,” which he claims is what Atatürk would do had he been in this situation.⁵⁷

Debates on the Nation-state

As Nuray Mert accurately observes, to discuss the “Kurdish question” means to discuss the Turkish nation-state, and even beyond that, the concept of nation-state itself. Mert observed that in the Turkish case, religious belonging and Kurdish identity challenge the existing secular nation-state structure and that corresponding political expressions found reflections in society. The criticisms of the nation-state experience reflect great difficulties not only because of the resistance of official ideology and hegemony, but also because of the very fact that they are far from convincing. Mert claims that, the justifications and

⁵³Altemur Kılıç refers to the letters –QWX- in the Kurdish alphabet that are not in the Turkish alphabet.

⁵⁴Altemur Kılıç, “Avşar kızın ‘açılım’ şaşkınlığı”, *Yeniçağ*, 02 October 2009.

⁵⁵Altemur Kılıç, “Birşeyler oluyor!”, *Yeniçağ*, 16 October 2009.

⁵⁶Altemur Kılıç, “Amerika’dan önce, Amerika’dan sonra”, *Yeniçağ*, 20 September 2009.

⁵⁷Altemur Kılıç, “Erdoğan’ın ‘Rübikon’u”, *Yeniçağ*, 13 September 2009.

contributions of these criticisms notwithstanding, it can be argued that they are cruelly destroying the world of ordinary citizens who define themselves within the framework of the nation-state. Mert observes that the nation-state is a positive structure as long as it signifies detachment from the traditional structures and presents the examples of Afghanistan and Iraq that show how brutal repression can mask the failures of the nation-state. Therefore, it can be argued that the nation-state maintains its importance as long as it is reformed in such a way as to eradicate its uniformity, exclusion and authoritarianism.⁵⁸

Mert makes a clear reference to the level of the international system in stating that the religious and Kurdish nationalist challenge is one aspect of the nation-state *problematique*; yet another aspect is the very international system. Accordingly, the nation-state project of the Turkish Republic has been in accordance with the international system. The Turkish state's authoritarian character has been developed with the support of the international system. It should not be forgotten that Turkey has been a part of the "free world" and the social repressions in place during the Cold War have not been truly considered.⁵⁹

Ali Bulaç seems to disagree with Nuray Mert on the nation-state. He presents a Koranic verse and explains that difference and religious, linguistic and ethnic discrimination are condemned in Islam. Following this idea, his deliberate effort to establish a "non-western sociology" incorporates the idea that "people" is the name of the collection of different ethnicities/nations that show a will to live together on a defined territory. Therefore, Mustafa Kemal's idea of the "people of Turkey" was correct, but the form [i.e. nation-state] imported from the West did not fit the historical and social reality of Turkey.⁶⁰

⁵⁸Nuray Mert, "Başdüşman: 'Ulus-devlet!'", *Radikal*, 01 September 2009.

⁵⁹Nuray Mert, "Kürt meselesi 'bu kafa'yla da çözülmez", *Radikal*, 28 July 2009.

⁶⁰Ali Bulaç, "Kavimler Birliği: Türkiye Halkı", *Zaman*, 31 August 2009.

In a similar way, Taha Akyol observes that the Turkish nation-state was established as a result of exogenous developments, including the establishment of nation-states in former Ottoman lands in the Balkans and the massacres and population exchanges from the Balkans, Crimea and Caucasia to Turkey. Akyol argues that Turkey was pushed towards centralisation and ethnic nationalism as a result of European influences in 1930s and claims that these mistakes exacerbated the development and expression of Kurdish nationalism. According to Akyol, Turkey is a nation-state founded on sociological, cultural and historical bases, which now faces war with the Kurdish nationalists who want to establish their own nation-state.⁶¹

Akyol complains that nation-state was glorified in the past and now has become unfairly condemned, presented as a “war mechanism”. He asks whether, in all truth, the massacres, tortures and plunders of the past can be blamed on the nation-state! Akyol claims that world peace is based on international organisations formed by nation-states. Akyol further holds that we lack a serious alternative to the nation-state and the objective must be to transform it to conform to contemporary liberal democratic standards.⁶²

In this framework, Akyol argues that to let Kurdish people establish their own nation-state would be an easy solution. However, contrary to otherwise similar examples in the world, Kurds do not live only in one specific region in Turkey. The question of how the separation would take place in practice is perilous, according to Akyol. If one part of Turkey becomes Kurdistan, the rest would become Turkistan, and this would be a catastrophe for everyone.⁶³

Cengiz Çandar raises the question of whether the unitary state is the same thing as the Turkish nation-state in the discussion process of the “Kurdish Initiative”. In this context, he argues that

⁶¹Taha Akyol, “Bizde Ulus-Devlet”, *Milliyet*, 15 September 2009.

⁶²Taha Akyol, “Kahrolsun ulus-devlet”, *Milliyet*, 14 September 2009.

⁶³*Idem*.

one of the three irrevocable provisions (Article 3) of the constitution which states that “the Turkish state, with its territory and nation, is an indivisible entity”, has been used by the opponents of the “Initiative” to block the process by putting forward that this would lead to the dissolution of Turkey. He notes his belief that these irrevocable provisions of the 1982 Constitution, which is product of a military *coup d'état*, would be eventually changed as in the struggle between democracy and fascism, the former prevails. He claims that the unitary state and nation-state references suffer from a huge twist in the way they are understood as parts of indivisible entity.⁶⁴

At this point, Çandar states that this is not the case with the understanding in Spain, which he claims to be another unitary state, and the Spanish constitution. Despite the fact that Spanish constitution refers to the unity of the Spanish nation and the indivisibility of the homeland, it also recognises and secures the existence of the constituent nationalities and the autonomy of the regions as the term “Spanish” refers to an upper identity feature which is not the case in Turkey and with the term “Turkish”. Çandar further argues that it is the Turkish state’s official policies which are discriminating and divisive and which thereby threaten the unity of the country which should change with the “Kurdish Initiative” by shifting its understanding of the unitary state from the Turkish nation-state as well as changing the policy of assimilation that has been referring to the slogan “diversities are our richness”.⁶⁵

Contrary to the liberals, Mümtaz Soysal ardently defends the nation-state in Turkey. Soysal argues about the equality of all citizens in a state without any discrimination; thus, he disregards ideas about giving a different status to a region or part of the citizens which would create different rights, freedoms and privileges. Although he puts forward the uniqueness of each

⁶⁴Cengiz Çandar, “Üniter devlet =Türk ulus-devleti mi?”, *Radikal*, 29 August 2009.

⁶⁵*Idem.*

country's history, near history of the social structure, he takes this fact as a reason for preserving the republic, nation-state structure and unity of the country by not adapting other states' cases of autonomy to Turkey.⁶⁶

Altemur Kılıç supports Mümtaz Soysal in his ideas of protecting the unitary nation-state and integrating Kurds to Turkey.⁶⁷ For Kılıç the question of “who is a Turk” and the unitary nature of the Turkish nation-state are very central in the understanding of the “Kurdish Initiative”. Kılıç criticises some of the concepts and issues that are brought to the agenda for discussion like “Turkishness-being from Turkey (Türkiyelilik)” or the unitary nation-state, assimilation and the “language” of Turkey that he sees as part of a long lasting provocation process aimed against the state and now disguised as the “Initiative”. He states that since the establishment of the Republic people have referred to themselves as Turks regardless of their ethnic origins. In this sense, “being from Turkey” and being a “Turk” were not opposite or different facts but were in fact one and the same thing. For Kılıç, it was the purpose of Mustafa Kemal to provide a sense of self-confidence through searching for Turkish consciousness, its sources and language while forming the Republic of Turkey as a “unitary nation-state”. He explains this also as the logic behind the “Happy is he who calls himself a Turk” motto⁶⁸; not to assimilate but rather to integrate all to Turkey and thereby avoid the division of the country.⁶⁹ Kılıç considers this motto as the representative of the “national unity” embodying the very foundation of the Republic which is now under threat.⁷⁰

⁶⁶Mümtaz Soysal, “Tehlike ve Beklenti”, *Cumhuriyet*, 14 August 2009.

⁶⁷Altemur Kılıç, “Çok'tan 'teke' mi, 'teki' parçalamak mı?”, *Yeniçağ*, 14 September 2009.

⁶⁸“Ne mutlu Türküm diyene”, the Turkish original does not manifest a gender discrimination, since there is no differentiation such as he/she in Turkish language. In fact, Altemur Kılıç wrote his article in response to Baskın Oran's arguments about assimilation policies towards the Kurds in Turkey.

⁶⁹Altemur Kılıç, “Biz kimleriz?”, *Yeniçağ*, 08 September 2009.

⁷⁰Altemur Kılıç, “Avşar kızın 'açılım' şaşkınlığı”, *Yeniçağ*, 02 October 2009.

Altemur Kılıç sees the calculations behind the rise in the discussions about the “Turkishness”, “unitary state” and “nation-state” as very central to the goal of wiping out “Turkishness” from Turkey and thus creating an environment conducive to the division of the country. According to Kılıç all the major historical problems, the “pan-Kurdism” issue, Armenian issue, Cyprus issue, Patriarchate issue, just serve the primary aim of destroying the “unitary nation-state of the Republic of Turkey”.⁷¹

Finally, Baskın Oran argues that there is a chronological relation in the formation of the national economic market and the ethnic/religious consciousness of the minorities regarding the assimilation of these minorities. If this market is formed before the ethnic/religious consciousness, assimilation is possible; if the consciousness develops before the market, then the assimilation is impossible. This kind of market was formed in Turkey at the earliest in the 1980s but the consciousness of Kurdishness began to emerge in the 1910s and formed at the latest in the 1960s. The attempts at assimilation even after the formation of this consciousness only emphasise the existence of this consciousness.⁷²

The International Intellectual Influence

The opinion of Taha Akyol that is presented above within the framework of the discussions on nation-state, namely, the proposal of reforming the nation-state in line with “contemporary liberal democratic standards” constitute the basis of the international intellectual influence.

Baskın Oran has been the well-substantiated advocate of this argument. Oran observes that the imposition of human rights by the European institutions has evoked negative reactions on the

⁷¹Altemur Kılıç, “‘Çok’tan ‘teke’ mi, ‘teki’ parçalamak mı?”, *Yeniçağ*, 14 September 2009.

⁷²Baskın Oran, “Mecliste konuşamayan dağda konuşur”, *Radikal İki*, 01 March 2009.

grounds of the claims on the intervention to Turkish domestic politics. There is a widespread opinion that the acceptance of human rights mechanisms proposed/imposed by the West will result in the destruction of Turkey. Oran argued that to the contrary, the establishment of human rights in Turkey will decrease the level of external intervention.⁷³

Oran observed that Turkey is not strong enough on the three basic aspects of foreign policy, namely the military, the political and the political-social aspects. Therefore, its independence is limited. The religious and Kurdish nationalist challenges weaken Turkey in the political-social aspect. As long as Turkey perceives the Kurdish nationalist challenge as a terror threat, that is to say in the military dimension, it weakens its independence. He argues that the external influence within contemporary globalisation interferes in the independence of the country, but also reforms the country according to contemporary standards. This reform, that is to say, to do what the West is imposing by itself is to provide the independence of the country.⁷⁴

Within this framework provided clearly by Baskın Oran, Akyol argues in his analysis of the law suit launched against a famous singer and TV personality due to her statements and comments in the press about the “Initiative” that the judiciary has to leave its habits of “guarding” and must follow the developments in the contemporary understanding of law and justice.⁷⁵ While admitting the importance of the liberal argument of interdependence and globalisation’s effects on the nation-state, Akyol is explicitly against the idea that federalism is the necessary requirement of the liberal globalisation. He claims that the argument that the unitary state and civic cultural pluralism cannot

⁷³Baskın Oran, “İnsan ve Azınlık Haklarının Dışarıdan Dayatılması Sorunu: Türkiye Örneği”, *İnsan Hakları ve Güvenlik Konferansı*, Türkiye Barolar Birliği, İnsan Hakları ve Uygulama Merkezi, 7-8 December 2001.

⁷⁴Baskın Oran, *Sekseninci Yılında Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Sempozyumu*, Türkiye Barolar Birliği, 31 Ekim-1 Kasım 2003.

⁷⁵Taha Akyol, “Hülya Avşar ve Yargı”, *Milliyet*, 02 October 2009.

go together is mistaken – a mistake which is based on the misleading identification of the single party regimes of the 1930s with unitary state. Akyol further states that the problem is not the unitary state but the deficiency of democracy. In such a clear defence of the unitary state, Akyol is against the federalisation of Turkey on ethnic grounds.⁷⁶ He also finds it necessary to note that the disease of racism is a worldwide phenomenon which is by no means confined to Turkey; as he points out, Europe also suffers from serious outbreaks of ethnic nationalism and xenophobia.⁷⁷

Nuray Mert also reflects the importance of contemporary international intellectual discussions. She thinks that the term “democratisation” is not enough for explaining what is going on in Turkey, which looks more like a radical change that could be signified with the term “revolution”. However, since the revolutions of the modern period are left in the past now, she prefers contemporary discussions on “negotiated revolution” and/or “negotiated change”. She notes critically that the cost of the “negotiated change” should not exceed its pledges.⁷⁸

Analysing the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s success in Northern Ireland question and the failures of the Turkish government in the “Initiative”, Zülfü Livaneli concludes that Western nations have the capability of solving the matters *comme il faut* while eastern nations lose the ability of dialogue and solution.⁷⁹ He further claims that developed societies are ruled by common sense and collective consciousness while underdeveloped societies are signified by anger, hate and narrow interests.⁸⁰ Similar to what Akyol outlined, Livaneli quotes Özdem Sanberk, a retired ambassador, who argues that the solution to the problems cannot be provided by the recognition of ethnic rights or multiculturalism,

⁷⁶Taha Akyol, “Üniter devlet ve federasyon”, *Milliyet*, 28 August 2009.

⁷⁷Taha Akyol, “İrkçılık Cinneti”, *Milliyet*, 01 October 2009.

⁷⁸Nuray Mert, “Müzakere’ Çağı”, *Radikal*, 29 December 2009.

⁷⁹Zülfü Livaneli, “Toni bileyir da bizimkiler neden bilemeyir”, *Vatan*, 24 October 2009.

⁸⁰Zülfü Livaneli, “Bu ülkede makul insanın işi zor”, *Vatan*, 22 November 2009.

but must be reached by the revision of the republican values and principles in accordance with contemporary developments in the world.⁸¹

Mehmet Altan refers to a general confusion about the concepts in the understanding and solution of the problems in Turkey. Altan links this to the “Kurdish Question” in the sense of inexistence of a common reference to the concepts that would draw the general lines of the “Kurdish initiative” in line with the EU standards. The poverty of the literature in Turkey is mainly represented by the references to phrases like Turkey being “an indivisible entity with its territory and nation” which he considers as an evidence of a fascistic connotation in conflict with pluralism, individualism, basic rights and freedoms which constitutes the sources of democracy. Altan finds it incredible that Turkey, a country which is negotiating with the EU to become a part of this supra-national entity, is at the same time desperately trying to preserve the unitary structure of its nation-state. Rather, he supports the solution of the “Kurdish Question” with reference to the EU and its related terminology which would at least bring a standard in helping to provide a solution to the problems by embracing basic rights and freedoms as well as bringing in more democracy just as the EU members Britain and Spain had dealt with their terrorism related issues.⁸²

Altan perceives the EU integration process and in particular the adaptation of the political part of the Copenhagen Criteria as indispensable for Turkey pursuing any reforms at all since the use of “Ankara criteria” will not lead to *any* substantial progress – let alone progress in the “Kurdish initiative”.⁸³ Since democracy is the property of the world and not a local product, he maintains that

⁸¹Zülfü Livaneli, “Çözüm için aklın sesi!”, *Vatan*, 24 August 2009.

⁸²Mehmet Altan, “Ankara’nın bu ‘kavram cehaleti’ kader midir?”, *Star*, 26 August 2009.

⁸³Mehmet Altan, “Sayın Bakan, kaçta kalkarsınız?”, *Star*, 31 August 2009.

solutions to the issues must be discussed as Turks but resolved as members of the international community.⁸⁴

Altan also evaluates the AKP and its leader Erdoğan's approach to the "Kurdish Question" from what he considers to be a "cosmopolitan" point of view, a perspective which is accordance with the contemporary world. However, he finds that sticking to this position is not an easy task, given the very local "Ankara politics" that are represented in the parliamentary opposition's rhetorical nationalism which might tempt the AKP to abandon its position so as to preserve its domestic political dominancy.⁸⁵ Altan, from time to time, warns the AKP about the everlasting existence of the "old" Ankara, and urges the AKP not to neglect the EU process which as a spirit and mentality constitutes an antidote for it.⁸⁶

Altan Kılıç is very critical about the "harassment" of the US and the EU in their attempts to interfere in Turkey's domestic affairs. Especially, the EU's reports – which, according to Kılıç, make critical comments on the mottos "Happy is he who calls himself a Turk" and "Turkey belongs to the Turks" – make Kılıç nervous about the threats to the Turkish identity of the country which he sees as the primary foundation of Turkey that must be protected at all costs. He strongly questions Turkey's commitment to its EU membership prospect after facing bad approaches of the EU commissioners towards Turkey, their encouragement for the application of the federal system in the country and what they have been up to in the Cyprus issue. Kılıç also blames representatives of Turkey for obeying the instructions of the EU like the dogs waiting for orders in front of their kennel. He finds it hard to understand the passion for and addiction to the EU and states that Turkey and the Turkish nation have never been in such a desperate situation since the Ottoman Empire's stagnation and downfall periods.⁸⁷

⁸⁴Mehmet Altan, "Aman süreç Ankaralılaşmasın...", *Star*, 01 September 2009.

⁸⁵Mehmet Altan, "AK Parti'ye MHP tuzağı mı?", *Star*, 25 August 2009.

⁸⁶Mehmet Altan, "Başbakan'ın konuşması", *Star*, 04 November 2009.

⁸⁷Altan Kılıç, "Türkiye kimlerindir?", *Yeniçağ*, 17 October 2009.

Cengiz Çandar, as a liberal, on his part, underlines the necessity of a local perspective for the solution of the “Kurdish Question”. Though recognizing the importance of taking into account various other examples and histories, he emphasises the inevitability of resolving the Kurdish problem with a “Turkish model” which would provide answers to the country and address the particular problem’s specific conditions.⁸⁸

The biggest opponent to the international intellectual influence has been Ali Bulaç. In his analysis of the conflict between the West and the Islamic world, Bulaç refers to Robert Fisk who makes the observation that the Muslims are on the defence and that the West does not give them the chance to think. According to Bulaç’s unspecified reference, Fisk claims that American policy towards Islam is aggressive and the number of American soldiers in the Middle East is now twenty times more than the Crusaders. Within this framework, Bulaç argues that the main points of conflict between Islam and the West are as follows:

1. USA and Europe have been in control of the Islamic world which possesses 2/3 of the energy resources of the world. Muslims cannot control their own natural wealth.
2. The biggest structural obstacle for change in the Islamic world is the authoritarian regimes that are supported by the US and Europe. The West calls those who do not oppose its dominance “moderate”, while “extremist” is the term for those who oppose it.
3. The Palestinian question is essential. Unless the occupation ends, refugees are able to return to their homes, settlements end and Eastern Jerusalem is accepted as the capital of Palestine, this question cannot be solved.
4. Islam as a religion is systematically isolated in the global system and portrayed as evil. Western world produces each day a new term to insult Islam: fanaticism, fundamentalism, political Islam,

⁸⁸Cengiz Çandar, “Abdullah Öcalan’dan ‘karışık sinyaller’...”, *Radikal*, 18 August 2009.

integrity, radicalism, Islamophobia, Islamofascism, extremism, Islamic terror etc.

5. Muslims are not allowed to develop themselves in their natural process; their socio-cultural dynamics are manipulated.⁸⁹

Bulaç observes that the “project” of “Neo-Ottomanism” is imposed on Turkey as various western politicians, intellectuals and journalists have referred to the “Turkish influence in the former Ottoman regions”, “revitalisation of Ottoman political map” etc. especially considering the strength of the Turkish economy and army.⁹⁰

In his discussion of the Ottomans, Bulaç claims that the Ottomans had not considered the Middle East seriously while concentrating on the Balkans and Europe. The reference of Mehmed II, the Conqueror, was the Roman Empire. The Ottoman’s struggle with Persia/Iran prevented the development of its relations with the Muslims and the Turkic world of Central Asia and thereby curtailed its possible influence on these people. On the other hand, he argues that the Ottoman elite had always hated Europe, even when they were admiring it as a result of the European victories over the Ottoman Empire. Finally, he claims that the intellectual guide for the new Islamic world cannot be the Ottoman elite.⁹¹ In this sense, the Ottomans cannot be a model in today’s world where modernity is in deep crisis. According to Bulaç, the historical experience that is valid politically and geographically today is the Seljuk Empire. Within this framework, the main parameters are as follows;

1. Since the nation-state is disappearing in the changing world, the states with Muslim populations have to envisage a new process of regional integration, which also has to include the non-Muslims in their societies. Kurds are a natural part of this integration process.
2. As a basin where Arab nationalism collapsed, the Arabs can only exist together with the Turks and the Iranians.

⁸⁹Ali Bulaç, “İslam ve Batı neden çatışıyor?”, *Zaman*, 10 June 2009.

⁹⁰Ali Bulaç, “Osmanlı Modeli-1”, *Zaman*, 27 July 2009.

⁹¹Ali Bulaç, “Osmanlı Modeli-2”, *Zaman*, 29 July 2009.

3. Turks and Iranians cannot unilaterally take the initiative in regional affairs, either as conflicting as until 1648 or freezing as after 1648; the only possible relation is to act together.
4. Turkey cannot be isolated from Asian Muslims and Turkic republics as the Ottomans were and thus it should not compete but rather cooperate with Iran.⁹²

Finally, Bulaç claims that what is presented by the West and search for other models should be questioned. The models presented by the West cannot solve Turkey's problems; on the contrary, they aggravate them. However, Turkish state and society have the habit of importing ideas easily without any contemplation; the West thinks and Turkish society consumes. Just as the 19th Century western model caused new problems among the communities which had lived together for centuries in the Ottoman Empire, contemporary liberal discourse on reducing freedoms to individual freedom and personal choice is the base for new tensions and conflicts.⁹³

The Inter-state Level Influence

The columnists seem to agree on the American influence in the first stages of the "Initiative". Nuray Mert clearly states that the historical momentum of the current policy is the withdrawal of the US from Iraq. She feels the need to specify that whatever the historical momentum is, there is hope for the solution of the Kurdish question, and it should be followed.⁹⁴ Baskın Oran prefers a more balanced attitude by affirming that both the domestic and international atmosphere is conducive to the solution of the Kurdish question. The US is withdrawing from Iraq and a new mood of peace and stability is dominant in Iraq with President Obama.⁹⁵ Oran also takes a stance against the opponents of

⁹²Ali Bulaç, "Yeni bir birlik", *Zaman*, 31 July 2009.

⁹³Ali Bulaç, "Başka Modeller", *Zaman*, 02 January 2010.

⁹⁴Nuray Mert, "Gözü yaşlı Meclis", *Radikal*, 13 August 2009.

⁹⁵Baskın Oran, "Kürt sorununu çözümlenin önkoşulu: Tutarlılık ve demokratlık", *Radikal İki*, 16 August 2009.

foreign intervention by stating that the nationalist authoritarian mentality has often blamed foreign intervention in order to legitimise its own mistakes and misdemeanours towards its own citizens.⁹⁶

Ali Bulaç follows the same line of thought as he elaborates on American influence. According to Bulaç, the Kurdish question has been internationalised and it is widely accepted that the US, Europe and some regional countries have played a part in the question since the very beginning. Therefore, it is not convincing to argue that the US is not involved. Indeed, this is emphasised by the fact that the US President Obama mentioned this issue during his visit to Ankara and met with the DTP leader Ahmet Türk. Bulaç also refers to the speeches made by the American ambassador to Ankara, who argues that the government should have done more in addition to the military efforts that are carried out in cooperation with the American authorities, the Iraqi government and the Kurdish regional government in Northern Iraq. He equally refers to the words of the acting PKK leader Murat Karayılan who says that a solution to the Kurdish question is a necessity considering the US plan to withdraw from Iraq and Turkey's process of becoming an energy hub. Finally, he presents the statement of the advisor to the Turkish PM, Ömer Çelik, who maintains that this has been a national approach profiting from the opportunity raised by the American withdrawal.⁹⁷ In another account, Bulaç stresses that the PKK's moves and the American role have been determinant in the formation of a new initiative.⁹⁸

However, Bulaç disagrees with Baskın Oran on the fate of Iraq. He argues that the American withdrawal stems from the fact that the US has achieved its strategic aims in Iraq, and hence the cost of staying in Iraq became higher. Bulaç also argues that the US aims have been to destroy the military and material capacity of Iraq, thereby eliminating the threat to Israel, controlling the Iraqi

⁹⁶Baskın Oran, "Dersim isyan etmedi", *Radikal İki*, 29 November 2009.

⁹⁷Ali Bulaç, "Açılımın ABD boyutu", *Zaman*, 24 August 2009.

⁹⁸Ali Bulaç, "Açılımın Devlet Boyutu", *Zaman*, 22 August 2009.

oil, and dividing the country into three with a Kurdish federal unit in the north. Following the disorder caused by the occupation and consequent resistance, a stabilizing power was needed by the US, and since Iran and Egypt cannot fulfil this role, Turkey appears to be the most likely candidate. In this framework, Turkey can continue to help the Kurdish federal unit and though not pronounced, it can also establish a form of protectorate as it did in Northern Cyprus.⁹⁹

Zülfü Livaneli rather prefers to handle the issue through the criticisms of his readers and writes that some readers claim that this “Initiative“ is prepared abroad and imposed on Turkey. However, according to Livaneli, Turkey is a great country that does not need such a complex. What the foreigners say or don't say should not prevent Turkey from solve its problems. Livaneli claims that the basic rule, *divide et impera*, has been applied many times in the history of humanity, as it was the case with the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire. However, he states rather emotionally that even imperialism could not separate the Turks and the Kurds; despite all efforts, Turkey will not be divided after this stage.¹⁰⁰ Livaneli gets closer to Baskın Oran's analysis when he argues that the argument of the foreign rule of the country seems valid because Turkey is not governed properly by the Turkish politicians. On this subject, he also states rather desperately that “they did not leave us free for a century; it seems that yet another century will go like this”.¹⁰¹

Cengiz Çandar, supporting an indigenous and original solution to the “Kurdish Question”, admits that it has a cross-boundary foreign aspect which makes it further complicated. Çandar fiercely opposes the idea that that the process of the “Kurdish Initiative” has been initiated and guided by outside

⁹⁹Ali Bulaç, “ABD, Irak ve Kuzey Irak”, *Zaman*, 26 August 2009.

¹⁰⁰Zülfü Livaneli, “Kimse korkmasın bölünmeyeceğiz!”, *Vatan*, 22 November 2009.

¹⁰¹Zülfü Livaneli, “Ahmet Türk'ten ılımlısını bulmak zordur”, *Vatan*, 13 December 2009.

forces, in particular the US and the EU. He especially criticises the arguments of the parliamentary opposition in Turkey according to which the “Kurdish Initiative” started in response to US demands and is closely associated with the US plans of withdrawal from Iraq. Çandar downplays the validity and consistence of these arguments linking it to his association of the parliamentary opposition with “nationalism”, “inferiority complex” and an “anti-Western” line which, according to Çandar, makes it hard for them to comprehend Turkey’s strategic role in the world, making it a partner of the US and the EU in an almost equally interdependent relationship.¹⁰² He accuses the parliamentary opposition and those who agree with them of crude “anti-Americanism” and blames them for resisting any solution to the Kurdish problem only because they falsely think that there is a direct link between the timing of the “Kurdish Initiative” and the US withdrawal from Iraq. Çandar refers to his answer to a question for the Voice of America interview on the matter as; “Turkey does not need any incentive from the US for the resolution of the Kurdish problem. We want a solution. We have been struggling for this for years in Turkey. Millions of Kurdish citizens in Turkey want this. This is our problem”.¹⁰³

However Çandar also recognises the role of the outside actors, especially the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. As a journalist who had in the early 1990s acted as an unofficial envoy of Turkish President Turgut Özal in his attempt to establish links with the Kurds in Iraq¹⁰⁴, he is very sympathetic to the KRG and the Kurdish political leadership in Baghdad and the north of Iraq. Given that the PKK’s major forces are located in Mount Kandil in north of Iraq, Çandar predicts that Turkey’s rapprochement with the Kurdish administration will make the

¹⁰²Cengiz Çandar, “Yeni ‘Güç Merkezi’nde özgüven ve iyimserlik...”, *Radikal*, 28 November 2009; Cengiz Çandar, “Tek yol: Muhalefete rağmen yola devam...”, *Radikal*, 14 November 2009.

¹⁰³Cengiz Çandar, “Kürt açılımı’nın gazı kesilmezse...”, *Radikal*, 16 August 2009.

¹⁰⁴Cengiz Çandar, “Türkiye-Kürdistan ve AB...”, *Radikal*, 01 November 2009.

KRG an important “partner” or at least an actor in the “Kurdish Initiative” in Turkey.¹⁰⁵

Nuray Mert presents a contrary opinion. She states that some have argued that this has been a “Northern Iraq Initiative” since the very beginning. According to Mert, it would not be so if the AKP government was not authoritarian, the opposition responsible and the political party that represents the Kurds had a democratic vision. She claims that the Iraqi Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani can offer no democratic vision here, nor does the US; they would do so in Iraq if they could. There can be no domestic societal peace based on calculations of the security of energy routes and regional balances.¹⁰⁶

Çandar also claims that Turkey’s “Kurdish Initiative” and the “international system’s strategic horizons” and interests unite and overlap.¹⁰⁷ Çandar regards Turkey, a member of the G-20 – the club which he takes to be the “executive board of the international system” – as a rising actor in the international system and heir to the Ottoman Empire and a regional power.¹⁰⁸ Especially, he is proud to note that his claim that Turkey would be the country to benefit most from the Iraqi War turned to be true and thereby Turkey came to be recognised as a “regional power”.¹⁰⁹ That is why he thinks that this time it will be “different” and is hopeful for the success of the “Kurdish Initiative” in Turkey. Against the purported analogy between the Ottoman Empire in its dissolution process and the Turkish state today, Çandar claims that Turkey today is not going through a phase which similar to the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire a

¹⁰⁵Cengiz Çandar, “Kürt açılımı’ gözlüğü ile Irak Kürdistanı’nı izlerken...”, *Radikal*, 19 August 2009.

¹⁰⁶Nuray Mert, “Barzani açılımı”, *Radikal*, 05 November 2009.

¹⁰⁷Cengiz Çandar, “Osmanlı tecrübesi’ ve Kürt açılımı”, *Radikal*, 22 September 2009.

¹⁰⁸Cengiz Çandar, “One Minute’nin haklı ve meşru uzatma dakikaları...”, *Radikal*, 26 September 2009.

¹⁰⁹Cengiz Çandar, “Irak Savaşı’nın galibi Washington’a giderken...”, *Radikal*, 01 December 2009.

century ago. Instead, he suggests that the “Kurdish Initiative” is a matter of reuniting a country which has already been “spiritually divided”.¹¹⁰

Taha Akyol continues to emphasise the importance of contemporary universal standards. He enlarges the scope of the interstate influence in the Kurdish question and argues that not only the neighbouring Middle Eastern countries such as Syria but also European countries such as Germany are taking serious measures against the PKK which he takes to show that the diplomatic circle around the PKK is getting tight. Akyol believes that the developments in the world show that while involved in military and diplomatic struggle against terrorist organisations, countries also increase their level of democracy. In this sense, Turkey is in the right way to solve this problem according to contemporary universal standards.¹¹¹

Conclusion

With the introduction of the “Kurdish Initiative” into Turkey’s agenda, an intensive set of discussions started in public as well as in the press. The exact content of the “Initiative” has never been made public by the government although a designated minister tries to meet with civil society representatives and make limited statements with regard to the general drift of the process. However, the real content of the “Initiative” has never been clarified and the various columnists’ attempts to make sense of the still (supposedly) ongoing process have turned out to be blind men’s quest for describing an elephant. In the absence of clear principles, guidelines or pre-planned road map for finding a solution to the Kurdish problem in Turkey, public discussion has been shaped by the subjective understanding of the process by the columnists. The remarkable enthusiasm about the solution of the “Kurdish Question” can be clearly observed, although there is a

¹¹⁰Cengiz Çandar, “‘Osmanlı tecrübesi’ ve ‘Kürt açılımı’”, *Radikal*, 22 September 2009.

¹¹¹Taha Akyol, “Dağdan iniş başladı mı?”, *Milliyet*, 19 October 2009.

great deal of ambivalence with regard to the terms and conditions of this possible solution, including external influences.

In the initial phase of the process, despite the existence of distanced and sceptical approaches from the nationalist circles, the “Initiative” attracted support, mostly from liberals and Kurdish nationalists. At this stage, the general line of discussion rested on motivation and incentive behind the “Initiative” as well as its timing. Columnists from the nationalist left and right argued that the process was instigated by foreign involvement, particularly relating it to the US policies in Iraq. Unlike the foreign involvement in the Turkish-Armenian relations that revolved around the external pressures on Turkey to recognise the existence of an “Armenian genocide” which was manifested in various political decisions taken by national legislative bodies of some countries or clear statements of some foreign statesmen supporting the idea of “Turkey recognizing genocide”, there has been no explicit pressure on Turkey to solve the Kurdish problem. The statements concerning the “Initiative” are more expressions of support rather than actions aiming to shape the process.¹¹² However, this constitutes a part of the foreign interest in the Kurdish process in the public domain. Although finding a solution to stop the PKK violence as well as improving the conditions of the citizens with Kurdish origin have always been a concern and a top item on Turkey’s agenda, the specific timing of the “Initiative” raised questions about whether it is right timing for Turkey or whether it is exposed to implicit foreign pressure for the initiation of the process. In fact the apparent unpreparedness of the

¹¹²“I will tell you that with respect to the issue of the PKK, I think that the steps that the Prime Minister has taken in being inclusive towards the Kurdish community in Turkey is very helpful, because one of the things we understand is, is that terrorism cannot just be dealt with militarily; there is also social and political components to it that have to be recognized”. The US President Obama’s statement to the press during PM Erdoğan’s visit to the Washington D.C. reflects the careful wording concerning the “Initiative” without a direct reference. “Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister after meeting”, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 07 December 2009.

government to bring about a coherent road map or any concrete framework about the process seem to support the claims about external involvement and pressure which is consistently denied by the government.

Since the content of the “Kurdish Initiative” began to be shaped while the process is evolving, it is very much influenced by public discussions and developments related to PKK violence. As the content of the “Initiative” was not known to the public, the columnists began to define the problem and the solution, as well as the scope of the “Initiative”, by themselves in accordance with their well-known specific political positions. This has caused confusion about understanding the issue and the ongoing process. Despite the rhetoric, the government’s shaky commitment to the “Initiative” does not alter or contribute to their position related to finding a solution to the Kurdish problem.

One of the leading themes of the debates about the “Initiative” has been centered on the Turkish nation-state. Relevancy of the nation-state form in the formation and resolution of Turkey’s problems including the Kurdish issue has been a subject for debate. The ideas vary from pro-status quo approaches arguing to protect the character of the Turkish republic to strongly challenging this attitude with contemporary liberal premises or to the critical but cautious approaches disapproving of the state’s uniformity-based, exclusionary and authoritarian features. Despite the opposing views, a general tendency to reform the nation-state with the help of international standards appears to attract support to facilitate the resolution of some of the major problems of Turkey, in particular the Kurdish problem. This is the strongest manifestation of external influence on the intellectual level.

However, the scope and extent of the necessary change is a matter of debate as well. Those who are sceptical of international influence put forward arguments about the impact of direct external influence on Turkey with an agenda to transform the country in accordance with the interests of the global forces and in particular the US. The imposed transformation, as it is perceived

by the sceptics, is indeed a direct challenge to the existence of Turkey aiming at the very foundations of the Turkish state and/or traditional national and/or religious traditions of the country. Supporters of international intellectual influence argue for the necessity of change in order to overcome the challenges related to the existing conditions of the Turkish state which they perceive do not respond to its contemporary needs.

Despite the fact that a clear tendency for adapting new policies and approaches in line with international intellectual influence to handle the problems of Turkey is shared by most commentators except for the nationalist left and right as well as Islamist, specific interstate-level attempts to be involved in the “Kurdish Initiative” is not welcomed by all. The proponents of the status quo and the supporters of an indigenous solution to the domestic “Kurdish Question” are united in their opposition to external state-level influence on the progress of the “Kurdish Initiative”. On this issue, common points of reference among the columnists are the re-establishment of cordial relations between Turks and Kurds with an emphasis on the commonalities of the people, and reinstating Kurdish loyalty to the Turkish state under an original solution to the problem, which is to be in accordance with, or at least not conflicting with, contemporary international standards.