

# From Empire to Nation-state: Turkey`s Kurdish question and its inception

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## Chapter I: Introduction

With an estimated population of 32 million, the Kurds are referred to, by many scholars and organizations, as being one of the largest stateless ethnic groups in the world (Kirisci and Winrow 1997, Council of Europe 2005, MacDonald 1993, McKiernan 1999). Before the First World War, the Kurdish people were part of the Ottoman- and Persian Empire. The era culminating in World War I, however, saw a transition from multinational empires to nation-states. After the creation of the modern nation-states in the Middle East, and the unsuccessful attempt to form a nation-state, Kurds were divided between five different nations including Iraq, Iran, Syria, the former Soviet Union and Turkey (Gunter 2004: 197).

The shift from Empires to nation-states and being stateless in a world of nation-states had soon led the Kurds in each of these states in conflict with the central governments (Bruinessen 1994). Most of the 32 million Kurds of today live within Turkey (Soderberg and Philips 2015). Although there are no official statistics on the percentage of Kurds, studies estimate that they comprise 15–20% of Turkey's current population, making them the largest ethnic group within the Republic (Celik 2012). The Kurdish issue in Turkey has been dominated by conflict since its foundation in 1923. During the early years of the Turkish Republic, the Kemalist elite which won the War of Independence against foreign invaders and the old Ottoman regime premised the creation of the Turkish Republic with the equation of modernity and cultural revolution. Consequently, the deliberate construction of a singular national identity-the Turkish identity, and the elimination of the `backward elements` of society were regarded as necessary (Kiel 2001). This followed hard measures of assimilation, denial, relocation, forced migration policies and reforms against "the other" including the Kurdish ethnic group (Yegen 2011: 67-84). The Kurdish question has perhaps not only evolved to be one of the most pressing challenges for the past several decades, but has, as generally agreed by scholars of all fields, become "the main source of political instability in Turkey today" (Özcelik 2006: 1).

This study aims to investigate the root causes of the Kurdish question which subsequently has led to, what we see today as, the Kurdish armed conflict between the PKK, a Kurdish insurgency group, and the Turkish state. To do so, several components will be addressed in this research. The first chapter represents a brief introduction and sets the starting point of this research. The second chapter will be presenting the analytical tools which will help us understand and explain the origins of modern nation-states and the nature of nation-building. To do so, the analytical concepts of `state`, `nation` and `nationalism` will be accommodated. The third chapter of this research gives a short historical overview of the events and developments which contributed to the emergence of the Kurdish question. Two major developments are highlighted. First, the centralization reforms of the Ottoman Empire during the Tanzimat period which resulted in the loss of the centuries-old administrative autonomy and privileges of

Kurdish rulers. Second, the emergence of Turkish nationalism during the Ottoman period. The fourth chapter will, first, link the analytical tools of this research to Turkey's nation building process. It reveals that the founders of the Turkish republic saw the necessity to create a unitary Turkish national identity to be an equal amongst modern Western powers. Furthermore, it illustrates that the creation of a Turkish national identity affected the Kurdish people of the Republic and initiated the inception of the Kurdish question. The final chapter discusses the major findings and gives concluding remarks.

### **What is the problem?**

It was only recently, that Turkey was in the midst of tumultuous events after the end of the ceasefire between the PKK and the Turkish state in July 2015, the detention of co-leaders of the pro-Kurdish people's Democracy Party (HDP) and other members of parliament, the failed coup attempt in July 2016, and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's referendum victory to amend the Turkish constitution and consolidate power in the presidency. The PKK, as one of the dominant and the most radical Kurdish actors, was the first to openly strive for the full independence of a united Kurdistan. Since the insurgency group's first attack in 1984 in the southeast of Turkey, the armed clashes with Turkish security forces went through many cycles of direct violence and ceasefires with peace talks, yet a sustainable long term solution was never achieved.

The Turkish state's various attempts to tackle the age-old Kurdish conflict has repeatedly failed and has not only caused casualties on both sides but has also had a toll on the economic, political and social structure. With the spiral of escalation and de-escalation, it is possible that the Kurdish conflict which has not yet evolved into a full-fledged ethnic conflict will become more deep-rooted and protracted (Ozcelik 2014: 2-15). However, as Kramer argues, "even after the defeat of the PKK, the question will not go away as long as the state answers it in an unsatisfactory manner" (2000: 24).

Although Turkey's recent history has been critically dominated by the PKK insurgency, which has turned the Kurdish question into an armed conflict, it is important to acknowledge that the Kurdish issue is larger than the PKK insurgency and has been part of the Turkish Republic since its inception in 1923. Therefore, resolving the Kurdish question and subsequently also the armed conflict, seems to be now more important than ever. Murat Somer makes an important distinction between the Kurdish question and the Kurdish conflict in which he explains that "the Kurdish conflict emerged because the Kurdish question was not resolved peacefully and successfully" (2004: 255). This is the point of departure in this study. To understand the present and thus, Turkey's current Kurdish conflict, this study argues, it is important to first to look at the historical past of the Turkish republic which was established as a modern nation-state in 1923.

A main research question is developed to guide this study:

***How is the emergence of the Kurdish question related to the character of the modern nation-state building?***

To create a rich picture and to answer the main question, the following questions will be discussed in the leading chapters:

1. *How do the concepts of `nation` and `nationalism` help understand the process of nation-building in Turkey?*
2. *How was did the formation of a Turkish National identity affect the Kurdish question?*

## **The relevance of the study**

### **Social relevance**

The Kurdish question has had significant regional and international ramifications. Regarding the social relevance of this study, there are multiple reasons one should pay attention. Firstly, on the economic dimension, the Kurdish question which turned into a low-intensity armed conflict, has created a significant financial burden and damage to the regional and national economy. It has cost the country billions of US dollars on counter-terror measures in its effort to fight the PKK (Ensaroglu 2013). In addition, the warfare has been damaging to the Infrastructure, especially in eastern and south-eastern Anatolia with the most affected provinces including Sinark, Cizre, Sur, and Nusaybin (ISDP 2016). It has not only prevented economic but also political developments, especially in the Kurdish-populated parts of the country located in the east and southeast of Turkey which receive little public and private investments and has been struck by poverty (Altan 2002).

Secondly, the rising number of casualties the decade-long clashes between state security forces and members of PKK has left over 40000 deaths including members of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), the Turkish military, and both Kurdish and Turkish civilians (International Crisis Group 2001).

Thirdly, the conflict has been subject to numerous forms of suppression, human rights violations and injustices including torture, imprisonments and forced displacements which have significantly influenced the lives and livelihoods of Turkey`s Kurdish citizens (Whitman 1993, Yildiz 2005, Yildiz 2013).

Fourthly, due to the visibility of Turkey`s conflict with the PKK, the Kurdish question has also had significant political and international ramifications. On the one hand, it had impacts on Turkey`s relation with its Middle Eastern neighbours in terms of foreign policy (Ail 2006), and on the other hand, it was a significant factor hindering the country`s long-standing attempts to join the European Union, and has been perceived as an important obstacle to further democratize the country (Kirisci 2004, Akyol 2006, Agirdir 2008). In light of these consequences, understanding the root causes of this complex and protracted conflict is therefore of high value for Turkey`s economy, its political relations, and its citizens` well-being.



## Scientific relevance

The study of this issue is also scientifically relevant. In the last decades, the Kurds have grown in importance, and leading literature has been multiplied and created (Bajalan and Karimi). For instance, numerous scholars and their academic studies have discussed and analysed different aspects of the Kurdish question<sup>1</sup>. Yet, the availability of Kurdish history is, in comparison to other nations, still limited and marginalized. Also, in terms of conflict analysis, the analysis of protracted conflicts often fails to properly identify the root causes that lead to violence and broken societies. Therefore, analysing the root causes of the Kurdish question, in particular its relation to the origins and nature of modern nation-states, can not only help to create a more complex picture of the Kurds and their history, but can also give important insights to the fields of Conflict Resolution, International Relations to foster sustainable peace.

Furthermore, various authors have already discussed and analysed different instruments of the nation-building process, including the spatial strategies used to achieve national Integration (Kezer 2009). Others have written on the assimilationist policies that the Kurds were subjected to and which range from forced settlement (Jongerden 2007, Kirigci 2000, Ari 1995) to linguistic policies (Yilamz 2004). Some studies have analysed the Kurdish rebellions and the state's response to them (Olson 1989, Watts 2000). This particular study, however, attempts to shed a light on the formation of Turkish national identity as a process of nation-building and, therefore, adds to the greater understanding of Turkey's Kurdish question.

## The use of methodology

This research is based on a literature study. Due to time and financial constraints collecting first-hand data by doing research was not possible. The analytical tools in use will be mainly on the topics of `state`, `nation` and `nationalism`. Within the analysis the concepts will be applied to the Kurdish case. The literature that has been studied stems from a wide range of sources which are all relating to the Kurdish question. Moreover, all literatures are based on scientific articles and book chapters. Due to time constraints and the specific interest of this study, I have limited myself to pay special attention to literature which is related to the Kurdish question and the formation of nation-states.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Gunter 1990, 1997, 2008, Bruinessen 1992, McDowall 2004, Yegen 2006, 2011, Olson 1989, Kirigci and Winrow 1997, Vali 2001, Jongerden 2007

## Chapter II: The Analytical tools

### Introduction: Nation-states and their origins

Why have nation-states replaced century-long existing empires, kingdoms and the like. At the turn of the twentieth century developments saw the collapse and disintegration of such structures. The process of Nation-state building in the Middle East largely started with the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. In this process, the Kurds became divided between several newly established nation-states with a majority of the Kurds situated in the newly proclaimed Turkish Republic. In order to analyse whether, and in how far the nation building process, in particular, the production of the Turkish national identity, has incepted and affected the Kurdish question, this study first wants to take a look at some of the political theories that might help to understand and explain the origin of modern nation-states and the nature of nation-building. To do so, some of the theories will be accommodated to define `state`, `nation` and `nationalism`.

### The State

Many definitions have accommodated the concept of the `state`. Giddens, for instance, claims that `a state exists where there is a political apparatus [which is] ruling over a given territory, whose authority is backed by a legal system, and by the capacity to use force to implement its policies` (1989: 301). In theory, however, Painter is arguing, has the state has been typically positioned either as an organizational actor or as a set of organizational resources through which other agents (such as class elites) act. State theorists have tended to characterize the specificity of the state in one of three ways: in terms of the state's distinctive functions, mechanisms or spatiality. (Painter 2006: 756). However, scholars (Abrams 1988, Gupta 2005, Painter 2006, Mountz 2007) are criticizing these notions of the `state` because it has been seen as a singular unified entity. Gupta, for instance, argues that the state is `imagined` and does not exist as an entity. Painter (2006) agrees with this notion and claims that it is almost impossible to pin down what the state is and therefore, it should be rather defined as a prosaic set of practices. Moreover, to understand what the state is, it is important to highlight `everyday processes of state formation` (Sikor and Lund 2005). The distinction between state and nation has also been problematic in academia, as it has been surrounded by ambiguity offering a variety of definitions. In Gellner's definition, states and nations do not necessarily appear simultaneously, he continues that, some states have emerged without the help of a nation whereas other nations have certainly emerged without the blessings of their own state. For Wallenstein (2002) an established state, also is producing a corresponding nation and therefore, nations and national identities are often linked to statehood which, in Heywood's terms, `offers the prospect of cultural cohesion and political unity` (2000: 253).

## Nations and nationalism

Smith (1998) has argued that to understand conflicts it could be essential to include an understanding of nationalism. According to Heywood (2014), it has contributed to the outbreak of wars and revolutions, it has been closely linked to the disintegration of empires and the redrawing of borders and the birth of new states. Scholarly debates on nations have been existing as early as the nineteenth century. Argued by scholars, the famous question "What is a nation?" asked by Ernest Renan's in 1887 has marked the beginning of the academic debate (Utz 2005: 617). In the 19th century, scholars such as Renan have regarded nations as a 'soul' and a 'spiritual principle' to which it was given rise through processes of becoming aware of one's nationality. In the view of the social and political scientist Karl Wolfgang Deutsch, the definition of the nation is a functional approach in which nation is a collection of common history and common experience. Weber further elaborates on this notion and claims that the root of a nation is essentially related to ancestry and kinship (Anbarani 2013). Today, amongst social scientists, a variety of definitions on the nature, power, and origin of nations and nationalisms and national identity is existing. Wimmer and Feinstein (2010: 767) claim that they are 'ambiguous as to whether their primary aim is to explain nationalism as a political movement, the spread of national consciousness among a population (i.e., nation-building), or the shift in the institutional set-up of the state (i.e., the creation of a nation-state)'. Also, Anbarani (2013) notes in his article that this vagueness is reinforced because 'no mutual agreement about the relationship between nation and nationalism, nation and ethnicity and nation and state' is existing. Discussions and definitions regarding nations and nationalism can be contemporarily roughly divided and categorized into three categories of explanation: the Primordialist, the Modernist and the Ethno-symbolic approach (Anbarani 2013). This study will mainly discuss the latter two approaches within the works of modern theorist Gellner, post-modern theorist Benedict Anderson and Anthony Smith who belongs to the school of ethnosymbolism.

Primordialism became dominant in the twentieth century and believes that nation and nationalism are old phenomena and so they are natural and universal (Ari 2010). The view consisted of three approaches: Perennialist, sociobiological, and cultural (Ari 2010: 12). Within the perennialist approach, nations have certain characteristics which do not change in time. Within the sociobiological approach it is claimed that the root of nations stems from genetic characteristics and instincts. The cultural approach supports the idea that nations are beliefs which can be distinguished from the others in terms of characteristics such as religion, language or common history (Özkırımlı 2009: 93-94). In the mid-twentieth century, Primordialist approaches were mainly suspended which gave rise to modernist approaches (Ari 2010). The Modernists believe that nations and nationalism are a modern phenomenon (Anbarani 2013). The common point of the modernist approach is the assumption that nations and nationalisms are structures that are peculiar to the modern era, emerged due to events such as capitalism, industrialization, urbanization or secularization, and neither nations nor nationalisms could exist in the pre-modern era (Özkırımlı 2009: 105-106). Ernest Gellner (1983), one



of the main proponents of the modernist approach, claims that nations and nationalism arose with industrialization and thus, are the transformation of society from an agrarian based economy and social structure to one centred around industrialism. This notion has been subject to various criticism, for instance by J.A. Hall (1998), who states that that Gellner's argument is too functionalist and that his analysis is too limited. For Anderson (1992), secularization and the rise of print capitalism gave rise to nations and nationalism. In his account, it is nationalism which leads to nation-building and eventually to a nation-state. Moreover, nations are a fabrication because it `is an imagined community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign`, and nationalism is imagined because: "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communication" (2006: 6). For Gellner and other scholars (Giddens 1987, Hall 1996), the idea is that the nation is only a socially conceived "construct," a created entity in which the nation's elites form nation-states which then build their nations. In other words, nations are political constructs and they are imagined or invented to serve the political goals of various groups. Anthony Smith, on the other hand, belonging to the ethnosymbolism claims in his writings (1999, 2008, 2009) that the roots of nationalism are related to ethnic phenomenon and thus, according to Smith the answer of the question `what is a nation?` should be searched in the ethnic roots of the nations, and nationalism is both modern and traditional (Smith 1972: 20). In general, ethno-symbolism emphasizes the importance of symbols, myths, values and traditions in the formation of nations. Smith in particular, builds his theoretical framework on the critique of modernism. Smith's main thesis is that modern nationalisms cannot be understood without knowing the previous ethnic communities (Kara 2014). According to Smith ethnic communities share six dimensions: A collective name, a myth of common ancestry, historical memories, one or more elements of a common culture, a natural tie to the country, sense of solidarity (Smith 2006: 173).

To conclude, according to modernist thinkers and in line with Gellner, the nation is a political construct, an invented entity to serve the political goals of various groups (elites). These groups first form nation-states and then build their nations. All together they are a phenomenon born because of industrialization.

The post-modernist Anderson defines a nation as an `imagined political community`. It is imagined as a territorially limited sovereign community and was created as a result of secularization and the spread of print press. In his account, it is nationalism which leads to nation-building and eventually to a nation-state.

Smith, who belongs to the ethnosymbolist approach, defines a nation as a named human community occupying a homeland, with common myths and a shared history, a common public culture, a single economy and common rights and duties for all members" (Smith 2001: 13). For Akyol (2006) debates on whether modern nations have ethnic origins or not might be arguable, however, he says, it is a widely accepted fact that nation-states arose due to a long process of nation formation.

## Chapter III: The making of modern Turkey: From Empire to Nation-state

The Ottoman Empire had been one of the major global powers, since the foundation of the dynasty in 1299 by Osman I and lasted for more than six centuries. After the first World War, which had brought about the partitioning of the empire, the Turkish Republic became the official successor state of the empire in 1923.

The following chapter, intends to discuss major events and developments which stood central to this significant transformation. Moreover, they are limited and relate to the core issues of this project: Which developments at the pivotal turn from Empire to Nation-state have contributed to the emergence of a Kurdish issue in Turkey?

Two main processes have been identified as the earliest root causes of Kurdish discontent. First, the centralization reforms in the Tanzimat period which resulted in the loss of the centuries-old administrative autonomy and privileges of Kurdish rulers. Second, the emergence of Turkish nationalism within the Turkish military and bureaucracy elites.

Little is known about the Kurds and their history before the 7th century and even the question of the Kurds origin brings great ambiguity. Emerging from uncertainty, the narration of the “Kurds” was first used during the period of Arab conquest, where they were predominantly known as nomadic tribes and related to Western Iranians who were settled in the Mountain region from the Zagros to the eastern Taurus Mountains (Edmonds 1971: 87; Hasanpoor 1999: 34).

In the period between the sixteenth and nineteenth century, the Kurds and the areas they inhabited became subject to the warfare between the Ottoman and Persian Empire which, in 1639, resulted in the division of the Kurds and the incorporation of their regions between both Empires (Alinia 2014: 46-47).

Within the Ottoman Empire, the governing policy was called the ‘millet system’, established to face the challenge of maintaining the Empire’s stability over its expanding territories, and to ensure loyalty and cooperation over its linguistically, ethnically and religiously heterogeneous population. The main source of identity was religion, and the subjects to the Empire were divided and categorized into Muslims (including the Kurds with the majority as part of the Sunni community) and non-Muslims (Yaplan 2015: 40). The Kurdish tribes which were organized in forty emirates (principalities), enjoyed a substantial degree of autonomy which allowed leading Kurdish families to govern some of the Kurdish regions directly under their rule (Loizides 2010: 514). In exchange for remaining autonomous, during the wars, armed forces were provided by the Kurdish rulers to the Empire (Yegen 1996: 217-218). Although, the Kurds were well aware of their cultural and linguistic distinctiveness, they identified with the larger Ottoman society (Barkey and Fuller 1989).

During the long nineteenth century processes of change and transformation, initiated by internal instability, imperial wars and the emerging of the European Great Powers were

characteristics of the Ottoman Empire (Quataert 2005: 54) and changed its political, economic and societal structure. In the search to reverse the severity of the Ottomans dilemma, and in order to stabilize the Empire again, attempts of modernization were initiated through the Ottoman rule.

With the Tanzimat reforms, beginning in 1839 and lasting until 1871, foreign political intervention, new administrative reforms, economic incorporation and cultural changes were launched. The reforms ultimately aimed to centralize the state administration and increase state revenues by collecting taxes directly from the local population. This, however, meant annihilating the millet system by diminishing the existing power structure which amongst others, favoured the local Kurdish rulers (Akyol 2006: 9, Quataert 2005: 54, Poulton 1999: 15). Once privileged members of the empire, the Muslim Kurds were discontent about losing their previous positions and several revolts, including the Badr Khan Beg revolt in 1847 by a Kurdish notable, the Yezdan Şer revolt in 1855, and the Sheikh Ubeydullah revolt in 1880, were the result of resistance (Yaplan 2015: 40).

The Tanzimat reforms also had a second significant outcome. The modernization period alienated an important constituent of the young bureaucrats and military officers who believed that the government of Sultan Abdühamid II was fundamentally outdated. They were convinced that the policies would lead to the destruction of the Ottoman state (Zurcher 2004: 86). The only solution they saw was to restore the Ottoman constitution of 1876 which would be following the example of liberal European states and would also return to the Islamic law (Pan-Islamism) which recognized the sovereignty of the communities. In 1889, the first secret society and opposition movement was formed by the bureaucrats and military elite, best known as the Young Turk movement and officially called the `Committee for Union and Progress` (CUP).

In 1908, the Young Turk revolutionaries saw the chance for a constitutional revolution and curbed autocracy of Sultan Abdulhamit II to restore the dormant Constitution of 1876 that placed power in the hands of a parliamentary government which proclaimed the equality of all Ottoman citizens (Quataert 2005: 65, McDowall 2004: 92).

As a result, Kurdish political and cultural societies burgeoned, not only in Istanbul but also in the large towns of the Kurdish southeast (Barkey and Fuller 1998: 8).

In October 1912, the Ottoman Empire came under attack from four allied Christian Balkan states. Seizing this as their opportunity, the CUP party took over power on 13 January 1913, promising to save the state from further losses (Zürcher 2013: 7, Quataert 2005: 65). Leading into World War I, also the Kurds, identifying mainly as Muslim Ottoman citizens, were fighting alongside the Ottoman armies (Barkey and Fuller 1998: 9). The motive of the Kurdish leaders was in line with the Ottomans' ambition to create a homogeneous state based on either ethnicity or religion, through a Pan-Islamic expansionist policy which would again strengthen their autonomy (Akcam 2004: 21).

The defeat of the Ottoman Empire by the French and British during the First World War, however, brought a significant change and diminished expansionist ideas. The Turkish state elites started to embrace Turkish nationalism through `Pan-Turkism`, seeing that `Ottomanism`, the Ottoman ideology, which sought to unite all ethnics and religions

under the banner of Ottoman nation, had failed and `Pan-Islamism`, became a disappointment (Magiya 2012: 21). Amongst elites and intellectuals `Pan-Turkism` was more and more perceived as the only solution for the survival of the state, and would unify all Turkish people, not only from Anatolia but also from across Asia. Moreover, the ideology was even open to incorporate non-Turkish people, who would be `Turkified` through assimilation (Burdulis 2014: 14-15).

In early 1916, a secret agreement, manifested as the Skyes-Picot Agreement, which was in 1920 openly declared as the Treaty of Sevres, was in the works to divide the remnants of the Ottoman Empire (Lewis 2008: 21-29). However, the possibility of a full independence of the Kurds which was discussed in the Treaty of Sevres, became dismissed in the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 when the Turkish state elites, the Young Turks, with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk as their leader, took over power in a war of Independence and expelled the European powers (Kiel 2011: 11-12). With the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne, the new pro-Western republic of Turkey was established and the Kurds and their provinces were divided between the new nation-states of Turkey, British Iraq and French Syria (Alinia 2014: 48). To guarantee the continued viability of the fledgling state immediately following the establishment of the Turkish Republic, the Caliphate was abolished in 1924 and allowed a Kemalist notion of a secular Turkish nation to emerge (Kiel 2011). Hence, Turkish nationalism which first started as a cultural movement (Mardin 1962) evolved into a constitutive ideology of a secular and modern nation-state (Yegen 2007:120) which equated nation-building efforts with modernization policies (Kiel 2011: 12, Alinia 2014: 49). Manifested in a series of sweeping social reforms, the Turkish state was in the midst of transformative change and by that also affecting the fate of the Kurds.

In conclusion, we can review that the first root cause of Kurdish discontent was the centralization policies of the Ottoman Empire which aimed to demolish the millet `system` under which the Kurdish leaders enjoyed great autonomy. In fear to lose their power and privileges, the begin of several Kurdish revolts were the consequence. The modernization period, simultaneously, gave rise to the second Kurdish discontent. The establishment of the Young Turk movement which later gave rise to Turkish nationalism. First, established as a cultural movement the Young Turks took power in the War of Independence and created the new Turkish nation-state. The new state was established on the ideology of a secular modern nation-state and saw the necessity to create a unitary Turkish national identity. As a result, this drastically changed the position of the Kurds within the Turkey.

## Chapter IV: The Turkish Republic and the Kurds

### The formation of the Turkish national identity

With the establishment of the Turkish Republic, Turkish nationalism was openly embraced by the founders of Turkey. Consequently, nation-building efforts of the Turkish Republic were manifested in a series of reforms and had the purpose to promote modernization, relegate Islam to the private sphere, and to establish a secular and democratic national identity for Turkey (Kiel 2011: 12, Alinia 2014: 49).

The main subject of analysis in this research is the analysis of the Turkish national identity, therefore, this first part of the present discussion will seek to highlight the conditions under which the founders envisioned this unitary Turkish national identity. The concepts of `nation` and `nationalism` in the works of Gellner, Anderson and Smith will be linked to the subject to help understand how the nation-state formation in Turkey was conceptualized by the founders of Turkey.

In Gellner's opinion (1983) nationalism arose in the modern era with the age of industrialization which saw the transformation of society from an agrarian based economy and social structure to one centred around industrialism. In the prior chapter we could observe that the Ottoman Empire was in fact a multi-ethnic society which in terms of cultural, political and economic developments could be categorized as agrarian. However, with the modernization period during the Ottoman Empire, domains such as the military, economy and the educational systems were modernized. This gave rise to the first wave of Turkish nationalism, when the Young Turk movement was born. After the establishment of the Turkish republic the modernization process accelerated immensely. As a result, the Turkish state elites distanced themselves from the Ottoman past and no longer recognized the multi ethnic society.

Furthermore, Geller argues that nationalism arose from the social conditions which resulted in the industrial society (Gellner 1997: 10-11). This view can be also related to the founders of the Turkish state. The state elite which received their education during the modernization period of the Ottoman times, were heavily influenced by the western ideology of liberalism and democracy. Admiring the nation-states of the western world which were based on a single nation, a constitutional government, economic development and industrialization, the Turkish founders wanted to create a similar nation from the remnants of the Empire (Magiya 2012). Anderson (1983) argues that conscious efforts rather than a natural awakening were behind the effort to create nations. Also Gellner believes that nations are a (political)construct, invented to serve the political goals of various groups. After deposing the Sultan and abolishing the Caliphate, a series of social reforms became the approved agenda. The ultimate aim of these reforms was to separate the new republic from the Ottoman past to establish a modern and secular Turkey to be equal amongst the great powers of the Western world (Jung 2001:60. Consequently, according to modernists it could be argued that the creation of a Turkish nation is a necessity to transition from traditional pre-agrarian



(Ottoman) societies to modern societies. Deriving from this notion then Nations and national identities are socially constructed (Anderson 1983) and the homogenization of culture is necessary to create a modern civil society (Gellner 1997). This cultural standardization-a common Turk identity, can therefore only be achieved by the fabrication of a nation (Anderson 1983, Gellner 1997).

However, because the Ottoman Empire was a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society constituting different identities, Turkish national consciousness was not existing among the public and therefore the creation of a Turkish nation by means of modernization was seen as the solution (Magiya 2012:21). What followed was the centralization of state authority and the unification of the different education systems of the old Ottoman Empire to mass educate the society in a nationalistic way (Baran 2010:25).

Consequently, in the effort to create a unitary national Identity and to erode the last marks of society that were traditional and therefore not modern, a new alphabet was introduced in which Ataturk changed the official language from Ottoman to modern Turkish (Yavuz 1998:11). Furthermore, religious schools were prohibited and replaced by compulsory state controlled schools (Schoen 2013). Community houses (Halkevleri) were established to bring high westernized culture to the rural areas (Schoen 2013) and Institutions were create to establish a common culture and thereby to spread the idea of Turkishness amongst Turkish citizens (Poulton 1997).

Smith (1999, 2008, 2009), however, believes that the roots of nationalism are related to an ethnic phenomenon and the ethnic roots nations, and nationalism is both modern and traditional (Smith 1972: 20). Therefore, nationalism is not only build on political factors but also on psychological factors (Smith 1998). To feel attached to Turkey then, and in order to create a united nation, Smith suggests six dimensions that ethnic communities must share for a united nation to establish. A collective name, common ancestry and a common culture are examples of such preconditions (Smith 2006: 173). However, while these factors are according to Smith (1991) embedded in history, they include constructions about the desirable future. In essence, the formation of nations is a fundamentally cultural process for Smith. Moreover, he argues, that if such common bonds to not exist, the creation of a unified nation might be difficult to achieve, but not impossible. As way to reach the formation of a nation can be achieved by intellectuals and elites who belong the ethnic community of subject. To form a nation around an ethnic conception, these elites and intellectuals can attempt to select and reinterpret the past by re-appropriating the myths, symbols and traditions. This notion might be helpful in explaining the inception of the Kurdish question and will be further discussed in the next section.

### **Turkish national identity and the exclusion of the Kurds**

The prior discussion has highlighted that the founders of the Republic, who were heavily influenced by their western education during the modernization period in the Ottoman Empire, were in admiration of western nation-states which were based on a single

nation. Influenced by this ideology, the founders were determined to establish the Turkish Republic in a similar vein. The ultimate aim was to establish a modern Turkey which would diminish the traditional remnants of the Ottoman Empire. Hence, a new constitution was set in place which was outlining the new principles and ideology to its citizens.

When the Turkish Republic was established in 1923 and Turkish nationalism was officially embraced as the new state ideology, a new Constitution in which the implications of this ideology was explained to the citizens of Turkey. The introduction of the new Constitution stated the following:

*'Our state is a nation state. It is not a multi-national state. The state does not recognize any other than Turk. There are people which come from different [ethnic] races and who should have equal rights within the country. Yet it is not possible to give rights to these people in accordance with their racial [ethnic] status'* (cited from Yegen 2009: 599).

Consequently, the construction of a unitary national identity which was based on Turkism became necessary means to build a modern nation-state. Although according to this statement the Kurds were recognized as an ethnic group they had to submit to the Constitution which meant that no special rights would be granted to the Kurdish leaders. This, was however, problematic for the Kurdish leaders as they were expecting to regain the autonomy they once had in the Ottoman Empire. This hope was further assured when in the beginning of the War of Independence, Ataturk was invoking the equality of Turks and Kurds and their commonality of the struggle (Barkey and Fuller 1998: 9). As a consequence, assimilation efforts<sup>2</sup>, through cultural integration by the governing state was displaying hard measurements in terms of reforms.

These reforms, for instance, prohibited Kurds to give their infants Kurdish names and Kurdish provinces were renamed with Turkish ones (Harper 2007: 163). Religious schools were abolished and compulsory western education became the norm. In other words, the new policy of the state denied all other identities. Alinia (2004:45) argues similarly, stating that the denial of Kurdish and other minority identities was a necessary condition for the construction of national identity.

Yet, the effort to promote the idea of Turkishness was only partially successful (McDowall 2004: 404). Consequently, a series of Kurdish revolts erupted, with the last great rebellion in Dersim 1937 and 1938 which was violently suppressed by the Turkish state (Van Bruinessen 2007). This is in line with Smith's argument, according to him, nationalism is not only build on political factors but also on common psychological factors such as a common history or common culture. Hereby, intellectuals and elites who belong the ethnic community of subject can attempt to select and reinterpret the past by re-appropriating the myths, symbols and traditions to form a nation.

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<sup>2</sup> Mesut Yegen (2009) describes in great detail the implications of the assimilation policies towards the Kurds.

Natali (2005) argues that the nation building project created a we-they dichotomy that excluded Kurdish and other ethnicities was effective in the formation of the Kurdish ethnic identity. In this vein, various authors have argued, that the Turkish states exclusive policies had a decisive influence in shaping Kurdish nationalism (Yavuz 2001, Smith 2005, Van Bruinessen 2003) and that the `ethnic definition of Turkish nationalism` was linked to the `development of Kurdish counternationalism` (Somer 2004:241). Saatci (2002) has argued that Turkey`s assimilation policies, expressed in the form of compulsory Turkish language education and military service have contributed to the radicalization of the Kurdish nationalist identity (Saatci 2002).

## Chapter V: Conclusion

### Findings

The conclusion to the preceding first part of the analysis is that with the disintegration of Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Turkish Republic, the founding father of Turkey, openly embraced Turkish nationalism. This was the consequence to several developments. With the use of the analytical tools this study has found that the Turkish elites and intellectuals of the Ottoman Empire, who were heavily influenced by European started to admire the nation-states of the Western world which were based on a single nation, a constitutional government, economic development and industrialization. When the elites of the Ottoman Empire, the Young Turks, curbed the power and became the governing party of the Ottoman state, processes of nation state building were beginning. The ultimate aim of the ruling state was thus, the wish to become equal amongst the great powers of the Western world which were based on the modern industry. However, to become an equal amongst, the establishment of a nation state which is modern and secular saw the necessity to transition the traditional agrarian Ottoman society into a modern society. The Ottoman Empire was multi-ethnic, multi religious and consisted of multiple identities, Turkish national consciousness needed to be fostered and was believed to be achieved by modernizing the society and homogenizing the culture. Hence, creating a modern nation-state meant also the creation of a singular Turkish identity. The results of the modernization efforts were amongst others, mass education of the society in a nationalistic way. In addition a new alphabet was introduced, the official language was changed to Turkish, religious schools were prohibited and Community houses were established to educate rural areas. Hence, a modern Turkish state was equated to a singular unitary Turkish national identity.

These findings help to shed light on the first sub-question: *How does the concepts of nation and nationalism help understand the process of nation-building in Turkey?*

The concepts in use have helped to understand that the Turkish nation building efforts, which were the consequence to the development of Turkish nationalism amongst Turkish elites saw the creation of a singular Turkish national identity as necessary to build a modern-nation state.

The second part of the analysis has revealed that in order to create an unitary national identity based on `Turkishness` a new Constitution needed to be established. The Constitution explained that the new Turkish republic was now a nation-state which, in contrast to the past governing state (the Ottoman state), would only be based on the Turkish identity, and subsequently, would only grant rights on the basis of their Turkish identity. Hence, the constitution was initiated with the implementation of reforms that would change all state and social affairs in accordance with the Turkish identity. This included, for instance, replacing names of Kurdish provinces with Turkish names, the change of the official language to Turkish, compulsory western education based on

secularism and modernity. In other words, the creation of a singular unitary identity meant the denial of the Kurdish identity. This was a major consequence for the Kurds, as they hoped to re-gain the autonomy status they once enjoyed during the Ottoman Empire. The hope to promote the idea of Turkishness among all subjects of the Turkish nation-state was only partially successful. Moreover, it led to the rise of Kurdish revolts, which influenced the shaping of Kurdish nationalism, and at its extremists contributed to the radicalization of the Kurdish national identity.

These prior discussed findings, therefore, help us answer the second sub-question of the research: *How was did the formation of a Turkish National identity affect the Kurdish question?*

In conclusion, this research can argue, that the creation of the Turkish nation identity was enforced by significant social reforms which changed Turkey`s social structures and intended to assimilate non Turkish `citizens` into the Turkish identity. Subsequently, unsuccessful attempts to assimilate the Kurds into the Turkish national identity have led to violent conflicts between the Kurds in Turkey and the Turkish state and have contributed to Turkey`s Kurdish question.

This aim of this study was to investigate the root causes of the Kurdish question in order to create better understanding Turkey`s current Kurdish conflict.

The era culminating in World War I which saw a transition from multinational empires to nation-states, divided the Kurds between five different nation-states including Iraq, Iran, Syria, the former Soviet Union and Turkey. The shift from Empires to nation-states and being stateless in a word of nation-states had soon led the Kurds in each of these states in conflict with the central governments. Today the Kurdish conflict has been perceived as one of the most pressing challenges for the past several decades and has become the main source of political instability in Turkey. The Turkish state`s various attempts to tackle the age-old Kurdish conflict has repeatedly failed and has not only caused casualties on both sides but has also had a toll on the economic, political and social structure.

Therefore, in order to understand the current conflict, this thesis has argued that we must first look at the historical past of the Turkish republic which was established as a modern nation-state in 1923.

This research has helped to answer the following main question:

*How is the emergence of the Kurdish question related to the character of the modern nation-state building?*



This thesis has argued that modern nation states are based on a single nation, constitutional government and industrial development. In this light we have seen that with the establishment of the modern nation-state Turkey, the founders of Turkey were eager to base the state on one identity which would unify all subjects to the Republic. When the Turkish elite during the Ottoman Empire witnessed the failures of the Ottoman policies, which amongst others wanted to implement the Ottoman ideology, they quickly realized that in order to save the state from falling apart Pan-Turkism was the only solution and thus, after winning the war of Independence, Pan Turkism which evolved into Turkish nationalism became the new state ideology in the Republic and processes of nation state building started. The ultimate aim of the ruling state was the wish to become equal amongst the great powers of the Western world. However, to become an equal amongst, the establishment of a nation state which is modern and secular saw the necessity to transition the traditional agrarian Ottoman society into a modern society. The Ottoman Empire was multi-ethnic, multi religious and consisted of multiple identities, Turkish national consciousness needed to be fostered and was believed to be achieved by modernizing the society and homogenizing the culture. Enforced by significant social reforms Turkey`s social structures was changed and intended to assimilate non Turkish `citizens` into the Turkish identity. Subsequently, unsuccessful attempts to assimilate the Kurds into the Turkish national identity have led to violent conflicts between the Kurds in Turkey and the Turkish state and have therefore incepted the Turkey`s Kurdish question.

This study hopes that the acquired knowledge might contribute to the wider understanding of the current Kurdish conflict raging between the Turkish government and PKK.

### **Limitations**

This study faces some constraints and limitations. This study was too limited in its scope in order to shed a light on the complexity of the Kurdish question. Various scholars have already studies the Kurdish question from various angles and only the combination of all information can lead to a more complex picture. Furthermore, because I was not able to read articles in the Turkish language I was limited to English written articles only and therefore might have missed important contributions of Turkish scholars. Moreover, it would have been interesting to see whether the approach pf Turkish scholars and authors to such research would be significantly different to the work of western authors. By only applying a Literature study, this research is also one-dimensional and misses the opportunity to speak with people which have been personally affected by the developments of the early years of the Turkish republic. Analysing the root causes of the Kurdish question through personal experiences could have added to the complex representation of the Kurdish question.

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