

TURKEY'S NEW KURDISH OPENING: RELIGIOUS VERSUS SECULAR VALUES

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Over the last several months, Turkish politics have been roiled by the “Kurdish opening” launched by the governing AKP (Justice and Development Party). Though admittedly vague in its content, this initiative constitutes the boldest effort ever made by a Turkish government to find a peaceful political resolution to the long-festering Kurdish question. Yet, fierce reaction from both the opposition and the government’s own constituencies is threatening to turn the opening into another abject failure. Why did the “conservative-democratic” and reformist AKP do relatively little to address the Kurds’ political and identity-related claims in previous years? And why is it facing so much opposition, among both “pro-secular” rival actors and its own ranks, after initiating these long-anticipated reforms? We will argue that a major part of the answer to these questions lies within the mainstream beliefs of the Turkish majority actors with respect to ethnic and cultural diversity, nation and nationalism, external actors and, of course, the Kurdish minority.

To further our argument on the origins of the opening and its discontents, we draw from a comprehensive empirical project that systematically analyzed the contents of three religious-conservative and two secular newspapers between 1996 and 2004.¹ The two endpoints of the analysis mark the year when an earlier Islamic party (the Welfare Party) came to power and the year before the PKK resumed its attacks and the AKP government made its first, short-lived attempt to initiate an opening vis-à-vis the Kurdish question.² The content analysis reveals the beliefs underlying religious-conservative and secular elites’ thinking about ethnic-cultural pluralism and nationalism, in general, and the Kurdish issue, in particular. Despite the AKP’s reformist image, our findings indicate a limited amount of discussion and normative change in religious-conservative thinking on the Kurdish issue. Furthermore, while at least some religious-conservative elites became more sympathetic toward pluralism and U.S. and EU relations, some secular elites became more cynical about

EU and U.S. influence on the Kurdish issue and Turkey's unity and sovereignty.

Turkey's Kurdish conflict, of course, is a complex and violent trans-state and trans-national phenomenon. The war with the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), which continues to launch attacks on Turkish security forces and civilians within Turkey, as well as from neighboring Iraq, has caused the deaths of up to 40,000 people since 1984. Ending a period of relative peace that had followed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's capture and sentencing to life in prison in 1999, the PKK resumed its armed struggle in 2004. Notably, this return to violence coincided with a major period of democratization in the country, although only some of the reforms specifically addressed the Kurdish question.³

The demands of some Kurdish nationalists, such as constitutional recognition as a separate nation or amnesty for the imprisoned Öcalan, go beyond the recognition of Kurdish ethnic-cultural rights. Because they raise the question of sovereignty as both a symbol and a political boundary, national rights are more controversial and politically harder to address than ethnic-cultural rights are. This is true even in countries such as Spain, which is a consolidated democracy and has a considerably more decentralized structure than Turkey's unitary republic based on "one nation, one state."⁴ Turkish governments can also legitimately argue that at least some of the Kurdish nationalist demands regarding national rights and the PKK threaten the country's sovereignty, security or territorial integrity.

However, Turkey has also been slow in legislating and implementing a variety of ethnic-linguistic rights such as education and broadcasting in Kurdish, which have become standard practice in advanced democracies. For example, though Kurd-

ish broadcasting was legalized in 2002, the completion of all regulations and the removal of all restrictions became possible only in 2009, 10 years after Öcalan's imprisonment and four years after the start of accession talks with the EU.⁵ Political-party propaganda in languages other than Turkish became legal during election campaigns only in April 2010, representing one of the few concrete results the Kurdish opening has yet produced.⁶

Though the current opening is the boldest and seemingly the most comprehensive, it is not the first. Abortive openings were attempted in the early 1990s, in 1999 and, by the AKP itself, in 2005. These earlier attempts initiated debate on the Kurdish question. They shook Turkey's self-image as a monolithic nation and the dominant social and political perceptions skeptical of the public expression of ethnic-cultural differences. They also produced some important legal-institutional changes such as the abolition of the death penalty and the legalization of broadcasting in Kurdish. But they were met with harsh criticisms from state actors such as the military, opposition political parties and media. They did not open to discussion the politically more sensitive demands — which are now freely debated at least on an intellectual level — such as Kurdish self-rule and the recognition of the PKK. At the end of the day, they had limited impact in terms of ending the conflict with the PKK, meeting the expectations of Kurdish nationalists even with respect to cultural autonomy, and addressing the social, economic and identity-related problems that feed Kurdish militancy.

Besides the obvious need for political goodwill and courage, the ultimate resolution of Turkey's Kurdish question can be linked to structural changes in both external and domestic conditions, as well

as to changes in public perceptions of the Kurdish issue.⁷ External factors (such as EU conditionality and relations with the United States and the Kurds of Northern Iraq), domestic institutional barriers (particularly civil-military relations) and domestic-party electoral competition can all be considered structural. Beyond these, a policy reform on such a controversial topic also depends on changes in public perceptions and social values.

Earlier Kurdish openings suffered from lack of both the right structural and intellectual prerequisites for reform. Until the turn of this century, not only were Turkish public perceptions of the Kurdish question enshrined in past state policies, but the incomplete nature of the democratization process left limited room for elected governments to enact radical reforms in the face of opposition from the military and state apparatus. As we will discuss below, the current opening benefits from an improvement of various structural conditions, which may explain its timing, but the question remains whether, and to what extent, perceptions changed.

THE AKP AND THE KURDS

When the Justice and Development Party came to power in 2002, hope was high for progress on the Kurdish issue. Weakened after Öcalan's capture, the PKK had declared a cease-fire. Meanwhile, the prospect of EU accession had prompted the outgoing coalition government to pass groundbreaking reforms allowing limited broadcasting and private education in Kurdish. In its early years, however, the AKP did little to address the Kurdish issue other than invest in social policies, grassroots relations and infrastructure in the southeast. The liberalization of private broadcasting in Kurdish was not implemented until 2006.⁸

After the PKK repudiated the cease-fire in mid-2004, the AKP government began to publicly address Kurdish grievances. In August 2005, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan gave a historic conciliatory speech in Diyarbakir, expressing the implicit party line that democratization and common religious bonds between Turks and Kurds would provide solutions to the conflict: "The sun heats everybody and the rain is God's grace for everybody. Thus I address those asking, 'What will happen to the Kurdish problem?': The Kurdish problem is my problem.... We will solve all problems through democracy."⁹ However, Erdoğan's overall record of public statements on the Kurdish issue was mixed and confusing, at times denying the existence of a problem. Six months after his visit, Diyarbakir was engulfed in rioting sparked by the funerals of four PKK members, and casualties from PKK attacks began to rise. The last year of the AKP's first term was consumed by confrontation with the military and the secularist opposition over the election of Abdullah Gül to the presidency.

Reaping the benefits of its image as the anti-establishment party, AKP seemed to carry the favor of the Kurdish electorate in both the July 2007 general election and a follow-up constitutional referendum that established direct election of the president. The AKP then declared itself "the real representative" of the country's Kurds. Proposals for a constitutional amendment omitting the status of Turkish as the only official language were aired at the time but were subsequently postponed. The 2007 election also marked the return of independent Kurdish deputies in parliament, who coalesced to form the Democratic Society Party (DTP).

Launching its operations from bases in Mountain Qandil in Northern Iraq, the

PKK haunted Turkish-Iraqi relations.¹⁰ A deadly PKK attack in Şırnak in October 2007 incited nationwide reaction and led the Turkish Grand National Assembly to approve a land operation. Alarmed by the prospect of a Turkish incursion, the U.S. government responded by putting pressure on Iraqi Kurds to cooperate. In November 2007, Erdoğan met George W. Bush in Washington, and the United States began to actively share intelligence on the PKK with Turkey. It is widely believed that an understanding was then reached between the Turkish and U.S. governments that allowed relations to warm for the first time since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Turkey launched airstrikes against PKK bases in Northern Iraq followed by a limited land operation in February 2008. But the political situation remained static for another year. While military operations continued, AKP focused again on other parts of its agenda, swaying a court case pending against it for closure and failing to pass a bill lifting the Muslim-headscarf ban in universities. In January 2009, TRT6, the first public channel broadcasting in Kurdish, was finally launched. But, in the March 2009 local elections, AKP lost ground to DTP in the southeast.

In May 2009, Öcalan announced from prison that he would release a roadmap for a solution to the Kurdish question. Dismissing this roadmap, Interior Minister Beşir Atalay declared in July that the government had its own plan. Turkish commentators commonly called it the “Kurdish opening,” although the government preferred “democratic opening” or, to fend off opposition charges that it was catering to separatism, “national unity plan.” Rather than introducing a concrete roadmap, it appeared that the government intended to trigger more open debate on the Kurdish

question and start a reform and reconciliation process that would include the PKK’s disarmament and would culminate in peace and economic development for the country’s eastern provinces. Some specific proposals included a more generous amnesty for PKK rebels, public instruction in Kurdish (beginning at the university level), the changing of Turkicized local place names in the east and, significantly, a new and more democratic constitution.

The long-term results of this initiative are unclear. Two things became clear, however. First, it did trigger unprecedented debate on all aspects of the Kurdish question, including possible secession in the future.¹¹ Second, the government’s initiative invoked serious skepticism and opposition from both inside and outside of the government’s constituencies.¹² In a few months, both the Turkish nationalist opposition parties and the pro-Kurdish DTP called the opening dead, the former by pronouncing it “treason” and the latter “just another attempt to sideline the Kurdish opposition.” In December, amid incidents of street violence throughout Turkey, the Constitutional Court ruled to close the DTP for threatening the state’s unity.

ANTECEDENTS OF THE OPENING

The reasons for and timing of the Kurdish opening have been attributed to various causes.¹³ Important changes have taken place in both Turkey’s external and domestic environments in the last few years. On the external front, closer economic cooperation with Iraq’s Kurds and the modus operandi Ankara reached with Washington and Baghdad weakened the position of the PKK. Although Turkey’s EU candidacy stalled, the EU continued to push for reform, and the Turkish government did not abandon its public-

ity campaign for eventual accession. A breakthrough on the Kurdish conundrum would tremendously improve Turkey's image both to convince Western audiences of its democratic credentials and to further its own regional ambitions in the Middle East. In terms of the latter, the Kurdish question is an important piece of what Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has dubbed the "zero problems with neighbors" policy, manifested also in improved ties with Syria and Iran and the opening of the border with Armenia.¹⁴

On the domestic front, AKP faced structural impediments from the military and secular opposition. These were relaxed after the party publicly renounced the military's interference with the presidential election, and managed to secure the presidency and renew its popular mandate in 2007 — and after the Constitutional Court did not ban the party in 2008. The Ergenekon scandal, unraveling throughout 2008 and implicating military officers, intellectuals and bureaucrats in an alleged plot to launch a coup, further strengthened the AKP's hand. Finally, the domestic political competition over the Kurdish vote also made it urgent for the government to take a more concrete stance. The setback the AKP suffered in local elections in 2008 and the need to counter Öcalan's roadmap contributed to the timing of the "Kurdish opening."

In the area of external structures, the government has secured much more cooperation from Iraq, Iraqi Kurds, Iran, Syria and the United States to fight the PKK and isolate it internationally. The president of Iraq's Kurdish Regional Government, Massoud Barzani, implored the PKK to disarm and the Turkish government to make democratic changes as regards the Kurdish question while underlining that this is Turkey's domestic affair.¹⁵ Tur-

key opened a consulate in Erbil following a historic visit by Foreign Minister Davutoğlu. The growing economic interdependency between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds makes it unlikely that the latter may promote Kurdish separatism in Turkey. This reduces the specter of Kurdish irredentism and Turkish elites' fear that Kurdish cultural-political rights may facilitate future Kurdish secession.

To some extent, Turkey's EU accession process also provides an external anchor and facilitates the Kurdish opening in two ways. First, insofar as Turkey's membership prospects are credible, this diminishes the likelihood that Turkish Kurds would pursue secession. Second, the EU encourages both the Turkish state and Kurdish nationalists to shun violent means and provides standards and examples of how to meet ethnic-national demands short of violent separatism.

In the area of domestic structures and institutions, changes in civil-military relations since 2007 have increased the autonomy of civilian politics from military supervision and the government's ability to institute liberal reforms, to which the security-conscious and "defensive-nationalist" military and judiciary might object.^{16,17} Furthermore, ongoing and controversial legal-political campaigns have targeted and may have pacified the illegal and extra-legal elements within the security apparatuses, which are known in Turkey as the "deep state" and are believed to have contributed to the derailing of earlier openings. In the area of domestic politics, the government is much more stable and strong vis-à-vis political rivals than any Turkish government since the late 1980s. The AKP has ruled the country in a single-party government since 2002 and has renewed its mandate with comfortable ma-

majorities, first in the 2007 national elections and then in the 2009 local elections, albeit with diminished voter support in the latter. This provides the AKP with opportunities to undertake politically risky reforms.

In the area of beliefs and values regarding ethnic-national diversity, in general, and the Kurdish question, in particular, the evidence is less clear. During the 1990s, the expression of Kurdish identity and ethnic-cultural difference, which was more or less taboo for mainstream society until then, became acceptable and widespread.¹⁸ Turks' predominant image of their society no longer resembles a homogeneous melting pot. The society's ethnic, cultural and regional heterogeneity is more or less recognized as *de facto* plurality. Yet, it is not clear to what extent this acknowledgement of diversity translates into *de jure* pluralism. In other words, it is unclear how much it translates into recognition of difference, respect for the other and acceptance of particular rights, rather than fear of difference, the vilification of the other and sociopolitical polarization. There are signs of both. Liberal views of pluralism and coexistence, diversity-skeptical views nurtured by intolerance and prevalent interpretations of history, and anti-Kurdish values fed by the PKK conflict or ethnic Turkish nationalism all seem to be expressed increasingly. Both the EU (through conditionality as part of the accession process) and the United States (with its presence in Iraq and traditional alliance with Turkey) could serve as anchors contributing to reform. But widespread suspicion of external actors has also not assisted the Kurdish opening.

The AKP has represented the emergence of new socioeconomic and political elites that rivaled and in some ways transformed the country's traditional

secular elites. These two elite camps have partially overlapping but different beliefs and values vis-à-vis a variety of questions such as democracy and secularism, civil-military relations, foreign policy, and, ethnic-cultural pluralism and nationalism. In general, the more one can show that religious-conservative elites hold liberal and pluralistic beliefs vis-à-vis the Kurdish question, and that secular elite beliefs and values enable cooperation with religious-conservative elites, the more one can argue that the current opening has a better chance to succeed than previous ones.

Turkish elites tend to hold a reflexive suspicion of ethnic nationalism and minority rights, especially if these are supported by Western actors. This suspicion is shaped by the legacy of Ottoman meltdown in the nineteenth century and modern Turkey's foundational period in the early twentieth century.¹⁹ Many attribute the bloody disintegration of the multiethnic and multi-confessional Ottoman Empire to unfettered cultural diversity and competing ethnic and religious nationalisms backed by Western powers. By no means are such beliefs fixed, monolithic or unique determinants of policy preferences. But they influence political rhetoric and behavior by shaping people's expectations as regards the likely outcomes of different policies.²⁰ Some of these perceptions have been changing since the 1990s. But available studies do not show to what extent and in which directions the dominant elite perceptions are changing and whether they are narrowing the wide gaps between the majority Turkish society's and the Kurds' understandings of diversity.²¹

Many Kurdish and non-Kurdish actors agree that democratization is the proper way to address the Kurdish question, but they hold different understandings of what it may involve. They may agree that it en-

tails nonviolent, non-military means; yet, as regards legal-political reforms, Turkish actors tend to think that democratization is no more than the institution of ethnic-cultural rights, which are mostly defined as individual rights. However, many Kurdish nationalists believe that democratization means the constitutional recognition of Kurds as a nation and the political-institutional changes and group rights that follow from it. While Turks tend to view the PKK as a separatist-terrorist group responsible for unforgivable crimes, many Kurds expect that one result of democratization should be to grant the PKK some redemption, amnesty and political representation. Finally, Turks and Kurds harbor asymmetrical images of what it means to be Turkish. While many Turks view Turkishness as multiethnic, Kurds tend to view it as an ethnic category that has led to the denial of the Kurds' own identity since the beginning of the republic. At the same time, anti-Kurdish, ethnic Turkish-nationalist sentiments seem to have been on the rise since the 1990s and have been organized in the form of a loose and diverse movement called *ulusalcılık*.

These wide perceptual gaps need to be narrowed for any Kurdish opening to succeed. Without such change, any political party launching new projects to resolve the Kurdish question faces fierce resistance from skeptical sociopolitical elites. The AKP is no exception and has already been faced with harsh opposition from its secular rivals and from within its own ranks. AKP members who have publicly voiced their criticisms maintain, for example, that the opening was legitimizing the PKK and that overemphasis on ethnicity or the creation of a "new nation" would divide society and "conflict with democracy."²²

Such criticisms are not surprising, given what happened with earlier open-

ings. Yet, insofar as the core AKP socio-political elites hold different and more liberal beliefs and values vis-à-vis ethnic pluralism and the Kurdish question, the government may be able to overcome this opposition and succeed in moving toward a long-term solution.

ELITE VALUES AND THE MEDIA

If there is strong support for the idea of a Kurdish opening, then we can expect one or all of the following to be true: religious-conservative thinking about the Kurdish question may be consistently different from and more favorable to the opening than secular-elite thinking; religious-conservative thinking may have changed, adopting more favorable beliefs in the years preceding the Kurdish opening; or the secular elite may have adopted more favorable beliefs in the years preceding the Kurdish opening.²³

To assess the existence or absence of such developments among Turkish elites, we draw evidence from a comprehensive content-analysis project involving five major newspapers (three religious-conservative and two secular) between 1996 and 2004. The two endpoints mark the year that an earlier Islamic party (the Welfare Party) assumed the reins of government and the year before the AKP government began to take obvious steps in the direction of producing a solution to the Kurdish question. This lag gives us the opportunity to examine elite discourse in a time frame that clearly precedes the politicization of AKP's initiatives as well the resumption of the PKK attacks.²⁴

Turkish newspapers typically devote a significant amount of space to editorial writing in addition to reporting and do not hesitate to take proactive positions on political questions with a view to influencing

the public debate as part of the country's intelligentsia.²⁵ The five newspapers (*Yeni Şafak*, *Zaman*, and *Milli Gazete* on the religious side, *Milliyet* and *Cumhuriyet* on the secular side) were chosen both on the basis of numbers of readers as well as on their ideological positions. Among them, *Zaman*, tied to the powerful Fethullah Gülen faith-based community, is Turkey's best selling religious-conservative newspaper. *Yeni Şafak* has close ties to the AKP, and many of its writers act as formal or informal advisers for the party. *Milli Gazete* is closely associated with the Islamist-nationalist National Outlook movement (*Milli Görüş*), which was dominant in the now-defunct Welfare Party. *Milliyet* is owned by the powerful and pro-secular Doğan media and business group. *Cumhuriyet* is owned by the Cumhuriyet Vakfı (Republic Foundation) and is known to support Kemalist-Republican and secularist-leftist positions.²⁶ Utilizing a total of 4,850 newspaper issues, the project analyzed the contents of 42,463 articles.²⁷

What follows is a summary of the findings directly relevant to the Kurdish question. Religious (or secular) newspapers are lumped together whenever differences were not significant. The labels "religious" and "secular" are used, for lack of better terminology, for simplicity, and to comply with the popular *laik-dindar* (secular-religious) distinction in Turkey. As the findings show, religious or secular newspapers do not necessarily form a group with respect to political or economic questions. More often than not, a religious paper may be hard to distinguish from a secular paper with respect to such questions. However, the findings do indicate that the two groups of newspapers clearly differ from each other with respect to questions about religion, secularism and identity.

RELIGIOUS-CONSERVATIVE BELIEFS

Some aspects of the news coverage over this period support the claim that religious-conservative newspapers have adopted a more open outlook with regard to issues of national identity and ethnic diversity. As expression of ethnic difference has increased in Turkey in the last two decades, the concept of Turkish society as a "mosaic" has received considerable attention. On this topic, the discussion in religious newspapers was much more positive (i.e., welcoming Turkey's multicultural image, 83 percent of 125 codings), whereas the secular newspapers tended to be more neutral (58 percent of 146 codings); only a few references were outright negative.²⁸

The national ideology of the Republic of Turkey has arguably revolved around three main, partially overlapping axes: one ethnic or cultural-linguistic (Turkishness), one cultural or historical-territorial (Anatolia or Turkey) and one religious (Islam or being Muslim). As expected, views on the relative importance of Islam as one of three primary components of national identity varied along the ideological spectrum.²⁹ Religion figured most prominently in the language of *Milli Gazete* (44 percent of 160 codings), somewhat less so in *Zaman* and *Yeni Şafak* (32 percent of 271 codings combined for the two newspapers), and least so in the secular newspapers *Milliyet* and *Cumhuriyet* (7 percent of 252 combined codings). Secular newspapers by far accorded the pre-eminent role to various definitions of Turkishness (79 percent of codings on national ideology).³⁰ These broad understandings of nationalism may also provide a potential for a more flexible attitudinal framing of the Kurdish question by religious-conservatives. Common religion (Islam) and common histori-

cal territoriality (Anatolia) can potentially be interpreted as bridging attributes between Turks and Kurds, whereas the state's ethnic or cultural-linguistic emphasis on "Turkishness" has been an alienating element for Kurdish nationalists.

Did the emerging image of social diversity translate into a concomitant openness to political pluralism on ethnic matters? Much less so, it seems, although the religious-conservative press again appears more open to ethnic expressions in the political arena. The right of political parties to mobilize ethnicity has long been a controversial subject in Turkish politics. In 1971, such accusations led to the closing down of the Marxist-oriented Turkish Workers' Party, the first party that openly discussed the Kurdish question. Since the 1990s, a string of Kurdish leftist parties has been closed down by the Constitutional Court, the DTP being the last to meet this fate, in 2009.

In the time period examined, the discussion in religious-conservative newspapers on the right of ethnic parties to exist was balanced between neutral and positive, while that in secular newspapers was conversely mostly neutral or negative. This may indicate a higher predisposition among religious-conservative elites to accept a Kurdish party as a legitimate interlocutor in the political process. Indeed, the AKP, which itself faced the threat of closure in the past, expressed disapproval for the DTP's closure by the Constitutional Court, whereas the opposition praised it. At the same time, however, the AKP government did not introduce any discussion of reforming the 10 percent electoral threshold, which has left the Kurdish parties out of parliament in the past.

Support for EU accession was one of the markers that differentiated AKP from

its predecessor Islamic parties. The EU received limited coverage by mainstream religious-conservative newspapers until 1999 (before AKP's formation), when Turkey obtained candidacy status.³¹ After that, the plurality of the references to the EU became positive. By comparison, interest in the EU was higher in the secular press. As in the case of the religious press, the coverage became more positive in 1999. However, as EU pressure for reforms continued, negative references to the EU increased as much as positive references.

What was the basis of the negative references? It is clear that EU support for Kurdish language rights contributed to the backlash. The secular newspapers assessed the EU's role negatively (69 percent and 65 percent of codings on the EU's influence on national sovereignty and territorial integrity respectively were negative). The Kurds topped references on domestic actors that the EU supports in all newspapers except *Milli Gazete* (where they came a close second after Christian minorities).

DIVIDED AND SKEPTICAL BELIEFS

By contrast to the coverage about diversity and ethnicity in general, the news coverage pertaining specifically to *Kurdish* ethnicity does not support the claim that religious-conservative newspapers adopted a more open outlook either in comparison to secular newspapers or over time. Instead, the findings reveal internal divisions within both camps. Moderate newspapers from both sides included many sympathetic opinions about Kurds and their cultural demands, but this was counterbalanced by negative reactions from the flanks. Overall, hardline religious-conservative and secular opinion setters seem to have been similarly against a relaxation of state policies on the Kurdish question.

References to Kurds, in general, were predominantly neutral in four out of the five newspapers, but much more positive in *Yeni Şafak*. In terms of positive references, *Zaman* was similar to *Milliyet*, and *Milli Gazete* was similar to *Cumhuriyet*; however, both *Zaman* and *Milli Gazete* also contained a significantly higher number of negative references on Kurds.

As shown in Figure 1, the use of the charged term “separatist” (a common denunciation of the PKK, Kurdish nationalism and sometimes even any assertion of ethnic distinctiveness) was ubiquitous in the articles in *Milli Gazete* and *Cumhuriyet* and remarkably low in those in *Yeni Şafak*. These findings bring forth a telling

U-shaped polarization, with the rhetoric of both hardline religious-conservative and hardline secular media platforms in stark opposition to that of more moderate centrists.

One of the most controversial aspects of the reforms has been the extension of broadcasting and education rights in the minority language. During the period studied, media coverage of Kurdish language rights peaked in 2000 and 2002, when EU-backed reforms were debated in parliament. The secular newspapers used a great deal more ink on these topics than the religious ones (316 references per newspaper in the former versus only 67 in the latter). In other words, there is no indication of a major debate to form a strong basis

for reform on this issue within the religious-conservative elite. *Yeni Şafak* and *Milliyet* (representing reformist Islamists and liberal/leftist secular voices respectively) were more positive in their coverage; the discussion was very polarized in *Zaman* and overwhelmingly negative in *Milli Gazete*; it was predominantly neutral and slightly more negative than positive in *Cumhuriyet* (see Figure 2).

These findings suggest that support for general diversity on a rhetorical level (for example viewing Turkey as a “mosaic”) does not translate into united support among religious-conservative elites for actual ethnic-cultural

Figure 1: Total References to the Keyword “Separatist” (*bölücü*)

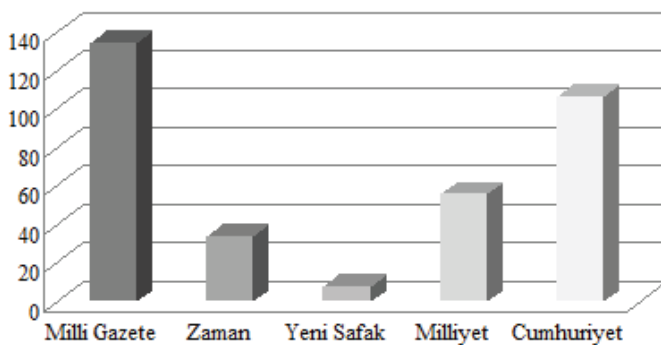
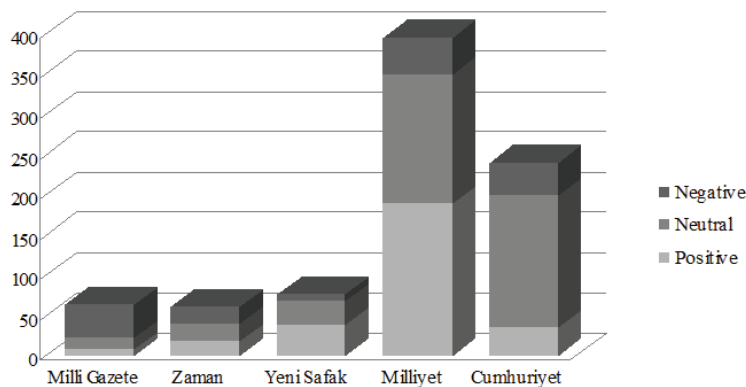


Figure 2: References to Education and TV in Kurdish



rights. The fact that *Yeni Şafak* consistently provided the most supportive coverage of Kurdish issues attests to the intellectual origins of the AKP opening. However, the fact that the outlook of the other religious-conservative newspapers diverged on this topic reflects the intellectual bases of opposition to the opening within the AKP constituency.

Through its presence in Iraq and influence on Turkey as a traditional ally, the United States is another external actor that could serve as an anchor supporting change. Although the United States has declared the PKK a terrorist organization and has increased intelligence cooperation with Turkey since 2007, anti-American feeling still runs high across the religious-secular divide. Negative references to the United States in all five newspapers jumped sharply after the Iraq invasion in 2003, with *Cumhuriyet* far outstripping even *Milli Gazete* in negative coverage. In this atmosphere of widespread criticism of its mission in Iraq and suspicion of American support for the Kurdish Regional Government, it becomes very difficult for Washington to play a positive role in Turkey's Kurdish opening.

CONCLUSIONS

Ideational reasons are by no means the only source of the opening's current limitations. The legacy of violence and the power politics between the PKK and the government are hard to overcome.³² Soon after the initiation of the opening, peaceful and violent pro-PKK protests and an ambush that took the lives of seven Turkish soldiers polarized society and undermined the opening. Although the PKK took responsibility for the attack three days later, they might also have been undertaken by semi-independent elements

within the movement. Either way, the PKK's response reflects its long-term strategy of asserting itself as *the* representative of Kurdish interests.³³ It also seems clear that the government made some public-relations mistakes in managing the opening.³⁴ Thus, the opening may require years to bear fruit and win hearts and minds.³⁵

Nevertheless, it is striking how weak public support was from the beginning and how strong the criticisms were, even within the government's own constituencies. This is especially surprising in light of the nationwide popularity that the government otherwise enjoyed. Such cynical and "conservative" public reactions were not peculiar to the current opening. Public responses were substantially as hostile as in the past even though, as argued, the political-structural environment surrounding the current opening is significantly more favorable. This underlines the importance of the need for intellectual/perceptual changes to complement structural preconditions. As our findings from press coverage suggest, more substantive changes are necessary at least on the elite level so that any Kurdish opening can be sustainable and successful.

The cynical and "defensive" reactions against the Kurdish opening seem to be fed by two types of elite beliefs. The first type affects both religious-conservative and secular elites and more or less reflects the mainstream tenets of Turkish nationalism. According to these beliefs, ethnic pluralism is predisposed to cause disunity and weakness if it is expressed politically, is backed by external powers, and involves linguistic, cultural and political rights. Therefore, as the thinking goes, Kurdish nationalist demands for self-rule necessarily involve separatism as opposed to simply regional or cultural autonomy. As

long as these convictions remain strong, the elites perceive the Kurdish question as a security problem, and the distinction between demands for regional or cultural autonomy and separation becomes blurred. Widespread public skepticism is inevitable no matter how hard the proponents of the opening present it as a matter of democratization and of strengthening national unity through peace and reconciliation.

The second types of elite belief that underlie elite cynicism are peculiar to the current opening and mainly affect the secular elites' thinking about the Kurdish opening. These beliefs are different from the first type in that, rather than feeding opposition to the substance of the opening, they seem to feed opposition and distrust toward who is leading and supporting the opening. They explain, for example, why many seculars oppose Kurdish rights despite the fact that the secular press in general had more frequent and more positive coverage of Kurdish cultural rights than the religious press. The wider findings of the project show that the AKP's coming to power fragmented the secular elites. While the idea that electoral democracy is a means for Islamists to come to power disappeared in moderately secular *Milliyet* after the AKP came to power, it was increasingly expressed in the more vigilantly secular *Cumhuriyet*. Furthermore, fear of Islamic politics weakened confidence in democratic institutions among secular commentators. Both newspapers opposed the military's involvement in politics in general (83 percent in *Milliyet* and 57 percent in *Cumhuriyet*). Whenever the context was "to protect secularism," however, the opposition fell to 33 percent in *Milliyet* and 17 percent in *Cumhuriyet*. At the same

time, as the findings summarized above show, many secular elites became increasingly distrustful of external actors such as the EU and the United States.

The reasons for this lack of trust between the AKP and the secular segments of Turkish society are beyond the scope of this article. However, these defensive beliefs may explain why many secular elites who in the past supported policy proposals that were at least as liberal as the AKP's — for example, SHP in 1990 — oppose the Kurdish opening now. This opposition to the opening based on who has initiated it creates a contradiction with liberal and leftist secular views in favor of liberalization during the 1990s. The RPP's opposition to the opening, which reflects defensive-secular beliefs, also contradicts the values of those same elites (for example, the writers of *Milliyet*) who are more attentive to, and supportive of, pluralism than the religious-conservative elites represented in *Zaman* and *Milli Gazete*. The policies of the RPP often contradict the attitudes of its constituencies, which tend to hold more liberal attitudes than those of the AKP.³⁶

While these findings do not necessarily suggest that the current opening will fail in the long run, they allow two conclusions to be drawn. First, the opening faces important perceptual challenges in addition to others that need to be overcome. Thus, its success will also require skillful public relations and democratic public debate. Second, the future of the opening is interwoven with other aspects of Turkish politics and democratization, namely the need for legal-political reforms that can address the problem of trust between the AKP and pro-secular elites and that can lead to the consolidation of Turkish democracy.

- ¹ The project was carried out by Murat Somer between 2006 and 2009, whereby trained student coders analyzed the contents of more than 40,000 articles in printed versions of 4,850 newspaper issues. The analysis is designed to infer elite beliefs and values as reflected by the discussions in the media, not public opinion, although a certain degree of interdependence can be expected between the two.
- ² As we will argue below, this period of analysis provides some advantages in terms of capturing the ideational potential for the opening. The PKK ended its unilateral “ceasefire” in June 2004, but clashes began to escalate in 2005.
- ³ Güneş Murat Tezcür, “When Democratization Radicalizes: The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in Turkey,” *Journal of Peace Research*, forthcoming.
- ⁴ Michael Keating and Zoe Bray, “Basque Nationalism, European Integration and the Ibarretxe Plan,” *Journal of Ethnopolitics*, Vol. 5, No. 4, November 2006, pp.347-364.
- ⁵ Between 2002 and 2009, Kurdish broadcasts were limited to four hours a week.
- ⁶ For related Kurdish demands, see for example Sezgin Tanrıku, “Siyasi Partiler Yasası Tümden Değişmeli” (The Law on Political Parties Must Be Changed Fundamentally), *Radikal*, October 22, 2009.
- ⁷ Murat Somer, “Why Aren’t Kurds Like the Scots and the Turks Like the Brits? Moderation and Democracy in the Kurdish Question,” *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 43, No. 2, 2008, pp. 220-49; Evangelos Liaras, “Turkey’s Party System and the Paucity of Minority Policy Reform,” *RSCAS Working Paper Series*, No. 56, 2009.
- ⁸ Hakan M. Yavuz and Nihat A. Özcan, “The Kurdish Question and Turkey’s Justice and Development Party,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 13, No. 1, Spring 2006, pp. 102-19; Hakan M. Yavuz, *Secularism and Muslim Democracy in Turkey* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp.171-201.
- ⁹ Quoted in Yavuz, 2009, p.189.
- ¹⁰ Bill Park, *Turkey’s Policy Toward Iraq: Problems and Prospects* (Routledge, 2005); International Crisis Group, “Iraq: Allaying Turkey’s Fears over Kurdish Ambitions,” *Middle East Report*, No. 35, 2005; International Crisis Group, “Turkey and Iraqi Kurds: Conflict or Cooperation?” *Middle East Report*, No. 81, 2008; Henri J. Barkey, “Turkey’s New Engagement in Iraq,” USIP Special Report 237, 2010.
- ¹¹ Among others, see Interview with ret. Ambassador Ümit Pamir, *Milliyet*, August 7, 2009.
- ¹² Siyaset Ekonomi ve Toplum Araştırmaları Vakfı and Pollmark, *Public Perception of the Kurdish Problem in Turkey* (Pollmark, 2009).
- ¹³ Ümit Cizre, “The Emergence of the ‘Government Perspective’ on the Kurdish Issue,” *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 11, No. 4, 2009, pp. 1-12; Cengiz Çandar, “The Kurdish Question: The Reasons and Fortunes of the ‘Opening,’” *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 11, No. 4, 2009, pp. 13-20; Soner Cagaptay, “‘Kurdish Opening’ Closed Shut,” *Foreign Policy*, October 2009, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/10/28/kurdish_opening_closed_shut.
- ¹⁴ Çandar, 2009.
- ¹⁵ Interview with Barzani by Hasan Cemal, *Milliyet*, October 15, 2009.
- ¹⁶ However, there is no sign that the DTP, the main legal political party that until recently represented the cause of Kurdish rights and has seats in the parliament, gained any more autonomy from the PKK.
- ¹⁷ Murat Somer, “Defensive and Liberal Nationalisms, The Kurdish Question and Modernization/Democratization,” in *Remaking Turkey: Globalization, Alternative Modernities, and Democracy*, edited by E.F. Keyman, (Lexington Books, 2007), pp. 103-135; Somer, 2008.
- ¹⁸ Murat Somer, “Resurgence and Remaking of Identity: Civil Beliefs, Domestic and External Dynamics, and the Turkish Mainstream Discourse on Kurds,” *Comparative Political Studies*, No. 38, 2005, pp. 591-622; Somer, 2007.
- ¹⁹ Kemal Kirişçi and Gareth M. Winrow, *The Kurdish Question and Turkey: An Example of a Trans-State Ethnic Conflict* (Frank Cass, 1997); Hakan Yılmaz, “Two Pillars of Nationalist Euro-Skepticism in Turkey: The Tanzimat and Sevres Syndromes,” in *Turkey, Sweden and the European Union: Experiences and Expectations*, edited by Ingmar Karlsson and Annika Strom Melin (Swedish Institute of European Policy Studies, 2006), pp. 29-40; Şükrü M. Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton University Press, 2008).
- ²⁰ Somer, 2005.
- ²¹ For related public opinion research, see, among others, Milliyet-Konda, “Biz Kimiz: Toplumsal Yapı Araştırması” (Who Are We? A Study of the Society’s Composition), *Konda Araştırma ve Danışmanlık*, 2007; Ali Çarkoğlu and Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, *The Rising Tide of Conservatism in Turkey* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

²² Among others, see AKP member of parliament Zekai Özcan's statements, *Habertürk*, December 12, 2009 and Mahmut Övür, "AK Parti'nin Açılım Karşıtları" (AKP Opponents of the Opening), *Sabah*, December 27, 2009.

²³ If the last condition held, political competition could prompt the AKP to address the Kurdish question.

²⁴ Reporting from 2005 on may be influenced by an entrenchment effect in news coverage whereby pro-government newspapers may support a policy because it has already been adopted, while opposition newspapers do the opposite. Also, the resumption of violence by the PKK from 2004 on may have hardened elite views against liberalization on the Kurdish question. Therefore, if we find strong ideational support before 2005, we cannot rule out the hypothesis that post-2004 PKK violence explains the reaction against the opening. However, if we find weak ideational support before 2005 as well, this is a strong indication that base-level support for such an opening was low to begin with.

²⁵ Metin Heper and Tanel Demirel, "The Press and the Consolidation of Democracy in Turkey," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 1996, pp. 109-123; Dilara Sezgin and Melissa Wall, "Constructing the Kurds in the Turkish Press: A Case Study of *Hürriyet* Newspaper," *Media Culture & Society*, Vol. 27, No. 5, 2005, pp. 787-798; Somer, 2005.

²⁶ Figures according to Yay-Sat and Turkuvaz Grubu (<http://www.medyatava.com/haber.asp?id=54670>).

²⁷ The content analysis was carried out by a team of 20 undergraduate and graduate student researchers trained to code articles according to a carefully prepared list of references including keywords and ternary value judgments (positive-neutral-negative) covering a number of topics including nationalism, ethnicity and minority rights. The coders sampled the five newspapers over the nine-year period, selecting one issue every third day of publication.

²⁸ On a related topic, the rights of non-Muslim minorities, the picture was more split: the coverage in secular newspapers was mostly neutral, *Yeni Şafak* and *Zaman* were mostly positive, but *Milli Gazete* was predominantly negative.

²⁹ These and similar findings also justify the arguably simplistic categorization of the newspapers as religious or secular, which draws on the popular "dindar-laik" distinction in Turkey.

³⁰ Regarding the content of Turkish identity, the coverage of secular newspapers revealed very low emphasis on ethnicity (1 percent) and language (7 percent) compared to alternative sources of belonging such as territory (25 percent), citizenship (15 percent), and shared history in the twentieth century (25 percent)—out of a total 1110 references.

³¹ The change was pronounced in *Yeni Şafak* and *Zaman*; *Milli Gazete* remained predominantly negative.

³² For example, see "Açılım Neden Devam Etmeli?" (Why Should the Opening Continue?), *Newsweek Türkiye*, December 13, 2009.

³³ See Adem Demir, "Ya Örgüt Bölünürse?" (What If the Organization Splits?), and Soli Özel, "PKK'nın Tasfiyesi Herkesin İşine Geliyor" (Everybody Benefits from the PKK's Elimination), *Newsweek Türkiye*, December 27, 2009.

³⁴ For example, İsmet Berkan, *Radikal*, December 19, 2009.

³⁵ Hasan Cemal, "Ne Oluyorsunuz, Daha Beş Ay Bile Geçmedi" (It Has Only Been Five Months Yet), *Milîyet*, December 16, 2009.

³⁶ Çarkoğlu and Kalaycıoğlu, 2009.