

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Structures, Choices, and Politics in Creating and Solving Conflicts

Turkey's *Kurdish Conflict* has been among the most violent and durable ethnic/regional conflicts in the world, since 1984 costing at least 55,000 lives—counting only those that could directly be linked with the conflict and discounting those that could not be documented.¹ It has continued in evolving forms and intensities and periodically seeming to subside and then resurge with a vengeance since the conflict's *formative* period between 1918 and 1926. Furthermore, the roots of this conflict stretch as far back as the nineteenth century, beginning with what I will call and describe as a *Kurdish Question*. This informs the conflict to this day.

How did the *Kurdish Question* arise? Why did Turks and Kurds fail to find a solution for such a long time? What would it take to resolve it, or at least begin to properly address it, today? What does this complex conflict teach us about how we can explain and resolve other conflicts in the world? Despite the presence of substantial corpora of scholarly as well as popular and journalistic writings² on the subject, we do not yet have satisfactory explanations of the *Kurdish Conflict's* origins, contemporary causes and dynamics, and its persistent resistance to conflict resolution. Nor do we have workable, theoretically and empirically informed guidelines based upon which future attempts at peace can succeed.

Available studies have produced rich and critical knowledge on historical and contemporary facts. However, as I will elaborate later in this chapter, rather than producing causal explanations, they have mainly generated noncausal or descriptive narratives that shed light on what has happened and the consequences. Further, they usually focused on one

specific period. Thus, they fell short of explaining the enduring causes of recurring violence as well as political deadlocks across different periods. Without a broader understanding, the existing literature could not offer policies that might effectively address the violence and redress political obduracy. Instead, this collection of writing has merely criticized the Turkish state and Kurdish insurgents for their actions, invited actors to adopt less violent, nationalistic, and authoritarian ways and embrace democracy, and condemned general and *longue durée* phenomena such as “nationalism.” More specifically, descriptive studies cluster around two themes, which I will exemplify later in this chapter: “actors with predetermined intentions” or “the inevitable consequence of nationalism and the nation-state.” Thus, the existing literature has failed to produce sound theory and policy implications beyond general theoretical and normative prescriptions.

However, producing causal explanations of the Kurdish Conflict is a challenging task. Such an explanation should tie the origins and formative periods of this conflict to the more recent and current, while carefully laying out what changed and what remained unchanged—or unresolved—across different periods and explain why. In other words, it takes a comprehensive analysis that spans multiple historical periods based on a common causal story and theoretical framework. Hence, the challenges are both theoretical and empirical.

The reasons why current research has not yet met these challenges are not only related to the weaknesses of studies on the Kurdish Conflict *per se*. They also result from some shortcomings of general theories of ethnic/regional conflict. These weaknesses undermine the usefulness of general theories when applied to particular conflicts such as the Kurdish one. Suffice it to say here that—pending a more elaborate review and discussion of current research at the end of this chapter and then throughout the book—general, metatheoretical, and mid-range³ explanations of ethnic regional and national conflicts can be grouped into two types. These highlight two quite different kinds of explanatory factors, from the perspective of policy makers and, in general, of people affected by these conflicts.

On one hand, “structuralist,”⁴ and, partially, some identity-based explanations highlight factors that are exogenous to the conflict itself and evolve by themselves. Insofar as these factors can be modified through human interventions, this tends to happen only gradually, at “critical junctures”⁵ of history and outside any single individual or collective actor’s control. People affected by a conflict must take these causes as more or less given at any point in time. These entail *longue durée* factors such

as geopolitics and socioeconomic conditions. They also include history, nationalism and the nation-state, and cultural identities. History, more accurately whichever records and collective memories of it are available, can be rewritten and reinterpreted over time but cannot be erased or ignored in the short run. The nation-state has developed and spread across the globe. It may be surmountable in the future but now is the dominant mode of governance, just as empires or feudal states were beforehand. Some aspects of our cultural identities were historically shaped, especially during crisis periods and at critical junctures. They can be transformed only across generations or at new critical junctures.

On the other hand, “instrumentalist,” “constructivist,” and “ideological” explanations⁶ emphasize factors that are largely endogenous to the conflict and more subject to human will, creativity and choice. In other words, these are more amenable to the interpretations and interventions of individual and collective social and political actors. State institutions, including electoral rules, constitutions, and state borders, for instance, can be made and remade. Hence, this second type of factors includes for example political and economic institutions, material incentives, and those aspects of our cultural identities that are given shape by contemporary social and political processes.

The Kurdish Conflict showcases how most conflicts cannot be attributed to any single major cause, be it geopolitical, economic, or institutional. Usually, multiple and interactive factors are at work. More importantly for my purposes, the Kurdish case also shows how it is often very hard to simultaneously account for the two types of causal factors that I outlined above when applied to a particular ethnic/regional conflict. The second type of factors—where the wills of actors play causal roles through their direct or indirect consequences—coexist and interact with the first type of factors. But it is very hard to conceptualize and explain how the two work together and influence each other. This is especially true if one wants to keep the explanation and theoretical framework as simple and accessible as possible and be able to derive realistic policy implications at the same time.

To cope with this difficulty, in this book I cast the *longue durée* causes of the Kurdish Conflict as “dilemmas,” rather than treating them as deterministic or fixed constraints. I argue that social/political actors must address these dilemmas in some form or fashion. Although political actors cannot eliminate the dilemmas entirely, they can “resolve” the dilemmas, that is, mitigate the pernicious and conflict-reproducing effects of the dilemmas on actors’ behavior. Such solutions may, for example,

include constructing new institutions and discourses. Hence, the dilemmas do not directly generate the conflict, I argue, but rather the inadequate responses to these dilemmas by social/political actors cause the conflict. Unfortunately, most of the responses and counter-responses by various Turkish and Kurdish actors during the Kurdish Conflict have reproduced distrust between the actors and the conflict. Nevertheless, in this book I will discuss how it was and still is possible to resolve these dilemmas and ultimately better manage the Turkish-Kurdish Conflict.

In short, the root cause of the conflict in my explanation is the historical emergence and then irresolution of three dilemmas. These “three fundamental or structural dilemmas” relate to *external* (territorial) *security*, *common identity*, and *elite cooperation*, which I will define shortly. The outcome—or the dependent variable—is conflict versus sustainable peace, i.e., conflict-resolution.

However, if it is possible to resolve these dilemmas, this brings up the question of why Turks and Kurds have failed to successfully resolve them and move forward toward conflict-resolution since the formative period. In other words, what determines the outcome in my explanation, that is, whether or not actors will be able to successfully address the dilemmas? I build my answer to this question by employing a combination of methods. I will utilize process tracing⁷ and historical event analysis to analyze the different periods of this conflict from its emergence to the present, by analyzing in depth and unpacking the formative period and recent conflict resolution attempts. By referencing crucial official documents and public political discussions and drawing comparisons with other conflicts in the world, I will construct “analytical narratives” and new theoretical constructs. I will also present findings from my content analysis research to shed light on elite beliefs and values in the 1990s and 2000s, and I will reference public opinion polls to illustrate my various arguments and theoretical propositions.

Thus, I argue that, while the root causes of this conflict are the three dilemmas, two explanatory factors primarily explain why Kurds and Turks—particularly the political elites—time and again failed to acknowledge and resolve the fundamental dilemmas. The first of these two factors that obstructed conflict resolution is the “politics” of intra-Turkish elite conflicts. Political considerations prevented Turkish political elites from properly addressing the dilemmas rather than factors such as ideology, nation-state, and actor intentions, which most current explanations emphasize. Politics⁸ here refers to processes such as building and consolidating political movements, parties, leadership, and institutions including state

organizations, which include such mechanisms as bargaining, pact making, deliberation, representation, and coercion. More generally, it captures all the dynamics, potentials, and pitfalls of collective and authoritative decision making and employing “legitimate violence” and state organizations to distribute power and resources.

The second explanatory variable is “ideational factors,”⁹ which became more influential after the formative period and over time. These break down into *ideational bottlenecks* and *ideational gaps*. The former denotes rigid and limiting ways of defining, expressing, and understanding key concepts such as nation, equality, and sovereignty, which came to prevail in mainstream Turkish public/political discourse after alternative interpretations were marginalized due to the political developments in the formative period. I will exemplify these bottlenecks throughout the book and then elaborate and conceptualize them into several categories in chapter 7. Ideational gaps refer to wide differences between how Turkish and Kurdish actors conceive and express key concepts such as nation and democratization as well as the causes and possible solutions of the Kurdish Conflict. As I will elaborate and theorize in chapters 6, 7, and Conclusions, for decades the Turkish mainstream public/political discourse silenced real discussion and knowledge on Kurds and the Kurdish Conflict. Thus, unlike Kurds, who have some concrete—whether feasible or not—demands and solution proposals, Turks lack sufficient knowledge and tangible solution proposals.

Together with politics, ideational bottlenecks and gaps undermine actors’ ability to imagine new political/institutional solutions, make different decisions and overcome (or reconstruct) the dilemmas.¹⁰ Thus, they also help explain the failures of conflict resolution attempts in recent decades.

Hence, and as will become more clear after my literature review at the end of the chapter, my explanation involves a dialogue between structuralist, constructivist/ideational, institutionalist, and agentic and voluntarist approaches to theorizing ethnic, national, and, in general, political conflict and change.¹¹

The Goals of this Book

In a nutshell, this book has four main goals. The first is to transcend extant, “standard” explanations that implicitly or explicitly suggest, or assume, that the paths on which this conflict was born and evolved were more or less the only possible paths. Instead, I will develop a “nonstandard”¹² causal explanation of why and how this conflict came about in its forma-

tive period, and why and how it has become a protracted conflict since then. In other words, I will explain both the actual path on which this conflict emerged and progressed, and the alternative paths it could have followed. I will analyze which logical and theoretical possibilities existed at various time periods then and show that these different paths were in fact imagined, considered, and discussed by contemporary political and intellectual actors. I will investigate the particular ways in which political elites tried to resolve these dilemmas in the formative period, why they did so, and what the consequences were.

Second, while my primary motivation is to develop a causal explanation of the Kurdish Conflict *per se*, I also aim to contribute to the development of general theories of conflict and conflict resolution, and, indirectly, those of democratization and social/political change, by treating this conflict as a “crucial case.”¹³

Third, following a brief exposé of the “premodern period,” I will walk through the evolution of this conflict from its formative period to the present, emphasizing recent events and peace attempts. In doing so, my objective will be to construct not so much a historical as an analytical narrative.¹⁴ That is, rather than presenting a fully fledged account of how the historical events unfolded, I will focus on narrating what did and what did not change during these periods in terms of the three fundamental dilemmas, and explaining which factors led to the enduring irresolution of these dilemmas. Through historical event analysis and process tracing, examination of political and intellectual debates, and a systematic content analysis of pro-Islamic and pro-secular press, I will analyze the factors that undermined attempts at finding a political resolution and peaceful settlement.

Fourth, I will focus on the recent and present periods and try to imagine possible resolutions to this conflict. Acting not only as a scholar *of* the present but also as a scholar *in* the present, I will try to develop practical proposals for how scholars, domestic and international policy-makers and observers, as well as ordinary Turks and Kurds can rethink this conflict and develop mutually acceptable solutions.

A Roadmap for the Rest of the Book

In the rest of this chapter, I will first offer a very brief synopsis of the Kurdish Conflict for readers less familiar with it. Then, I will explain the

difference between the Kurdish Question and Kurdish Conflict—two distinct analytical constructs for my explanation, and how one cannot explain the creation of the Kurdish Conflict without properly understanding the “Turkish Question.” Next, I will define the three dilemmas, which are the cornerstone of my explanation.

The remaining second half of the chapter will consist of a review and critical discussion of current research on Turkey’s Kurdish Conflict and then general theories of ethnic/regional conflict, ethnicity and nationalism, and how my explanation contributes to them. In this part, I will exemplify the two standard stories on the emergence of the Kurdish Conflict present in extant research and explain how they fail to offer satisfactory causal explanations. I will also explain crucial concepts in the historical analytical narratives and causal explanations I will develop in the chapters ahead, such as nation, nation-state, state-nation, ethnicity, ethnic categories, and ethnic groups, by critically reviewing relevant literatures.

Having summarized my main arguments in relation to extant research and having defined most of the key concepts for my casual story in the Introduction, I will be ready to start developing my nonstandard explanation. The goal of the second and third chapters is to show how the three dilemmas limit but still allow for different policies toward the *Kurdish Question*, that is, how different possible responses have been available to governing elites. The second chapter will elaborate the demographic, geographical, and institutional parameters of the *Kurdish Question* and draw comparisons with a “most different case,” the Scottish case, as well as with the *Kurdish questions* in neighboring countries, to illustrate the diversity and limitations of possible policies. The third chapter will narrate the historical evolution of the *Kurdish Question* since the premodern times and show that, at the dawn of the formative period, there were in fact different, “imaginable and imagined” ways to address the *Kurdish Question*.

The fourth chapter will focus on the formative period (1918–1926) and explain how the *Kurdish Conflict* was *created* when political elites addressed the three dilemmas challenging them in particular ways. By building an analytical narrative, this chapter will show how political developments and processes primarily explain the governing elite decisions in this period. It will also summarize the main political and socioeconomic developments between the formative period and the 1990s.

The fifth chapter will narrate the political and discursive but not necessarily ideational changes during the 1990s and 2000s, which laid the groundwork for the “re-formative period” in the 2010s, which I will

define shortly. In particular, it will explain how Kurds were transformed from an “unseen” minority to a “seen but unrecognized” minority.

The sixth chapter will focus on the re-formative period and explain why and how peace attempts—to properly address the three dilemmas this time—have so far failed. It will illustrate the reincarnation of the risks and opportunities that prevailed in the formative period to resolve the dilemmas. It will show how, in addition to the political dynamics, ideational bottlenecks—particular beliefs regarding Kurds and general categories such as nation that have become internalized by Turks since the formative period—and ideational gaps between “moderate” actors have been major barriers before resolution.

The goal of the seventh chapter is to elaborate the ideational bottlenecks, whose evolution was exemplified in the previous chapters, especially the sixth chapter, and conceptualize them into various categories.

The concluding eighth chapter will recapture my empirical and theoretical arguments and employ them to make concrete policy recommendations. In other words, after summarizing my analysis and conclusions as a scholar *of* the conflict, based on these, it will offer my prescriptions toward conflict resolution as a scholar and intellectual *in* the conflict.

A Short Synopsis of the Kurdish Conflict

As I will discuss in detail in the next chapter, Kurds constitute a trans-state ethnic/national group that constitutes sizeable—and geographically adjacent—demographic minorities in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and smaller minorities in other countries. They are estimated to form close to 20 percent of Turkey’s population. Following the World War I, an independence movement founded the Republic of Turkey in 1923, encompassing the Ottoman territories that it could liberate from the control of the allied powers through war (1919–1922) as well as diplomacy and treaties. During this process, Ottoman Kurds were divided between the new Turkey and the British and French mandates of Iraq and Syria. After this and through the policies of the new, pro-secular governing elites led by Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk, Ataturk), a wave of ambitious modernization and nation-state formation, nation building, and state centralization swept across Turkey, including in Kurdish lands. This was followed by a series of Kurdish insurgencies during the 1920s and ’30s. The state’s main response was repression and assimilationism, which has continued unabated despite a transition to multiparty electoral democracy in 1950,

socioeconomic modernization, governments of numerous ideological and political persuasions, and “promissory”¹⁵ military coups in 1960–61, 1971, and 1980–83. Until the 1990s, the official state discourse denied even the existence of a Kurdish minority.

In 1984, the PKK (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan—Kurdistan Workers Party), started an ongoing and violent war against the state for Kurdish rights and self-rule from within both Turkey and neighboring countries, in particular Iraq and Syria. A short-lived era of relative peace and reforms started in 1999 when the state captured and imprisoned the PKK leader Öcalan and Turkey became a candidate for EU membership. The PKK resumed its armed struggle in 2004. There were peace talks between the PKK and governments led by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and relative nonviolence in 2009–10 and then again in 2013–15. Since the collapse of these last negotiations, violence has resumed.

As I will elaborate in chapter 6, the current, post-2011 era is very similar to the formative 1918–1926 period in terms of the opportunities and risks faced by the political elites to resolve the dilemmas. In fact, I will call the current era the *re-formative* period of this conflict because it presents a *reincarnation* of the fundamental domestic and external conditions that prevailed during the formative period. Hence this book’s title, *Return to Point Zero*.

Just as in the founding, in pursuit of regime legitimacy and social/political unity on the basis of an overarching common identity, Turkey’s Constitution categorizes all citizens simply as Turks,¹⁶ regardless of ethnicity, race, and religion. But actual laws and policies favor Sunni Islam and “Turkish”¹⁷ ethnicity, culture, history, and identity. For instance, even though the—until recently illegal—“teaching of” minority tongues has been legalized in schools in elective courses, “teaching in” any language, that is to say, as the language of education, other than Turkish is banned. The state grants “minority status” to some non-Muslim minorities only, who comprise less than 1 percent of the population.¹⁸ But the state as well as mainstream social norms do not consider as minorities numerous other indigenous ethnic/linguistic and sectarian groups who are nominally Muslim, such as the Alevi, Arabs, Bosnians, Circassians, Laz, and Kurds. Hence, they have no separate minority rights, constitutional recognition, or autonomy. Many such groups became politically mobilized to demand mainly cultural recognition and rights, especially since the 1990s. But by far the most extensive and forceful mobilization with far-reaching rights-claims has been that of Kurds.

KURDISH QUESTION VERSUS KURDISH CONFLICT

Developing a nonstandard causal explanation requires us to distinguish between the Kurdish Question and the Kurdish Conflict. The Kurdish Question is a product of history: more specifically, the historical ascent of nationalism and ideas of nation-state in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and their spread to the Ottoman world in a period when the Ottoman state was engaged in major modernization efforts.¹⁹ Thus, the Kurdish Question would have existed regardless of the will and particular decisions of political actors. It emerged out of the modern development of nationalist visions and projects in areas where Kurdish people lived (e.g., Ottoman Muslim, Kurd, Turk, Turkish,²⁰ Armenian, Iranian, Persian, and Arab nationalisms, and Ottoman nationalism among the Ottoman ruling classes, i.e., the Ottoman “political society”).²¹ All of these nationalisms presumed a type of self-governance and sovereign state formation on more or less the same, or at least partially overlapping, territories. This gave rise to a series of questions. Which ones of these nationalist projects would succeed and which ones would not? Which ones of these nation-state or autonomy projects were more viable than the others? What would be the initial status of the Kurds in the Ottoman and Persian empires, and, later on, in successor states with majority populations and state identities such as Turkish, Arab, Persian, and Azeri-Turk? By aiming to remake the world order based on U.S. interests as well as Wilsonian ideals—which were not envisaged as racially and culturally impartial ideals—at the end of World War I, President Woodrow Wilson rendered these questions significantly more legitimate, urgent, and complex than they already were. He declared his famous fourteen principles—one of which was specifically on “Turkish and non-Turkish portions” of the Ottoman Empire—and promised to defend “the right of all peoples to self-determination.”²² This spelled the end of the era of empires. How could Kurdish nationalists’ yearnings for self-governance become realized in the presence of rival nationalist projects? To what extent was a Kurdish independent nation-state or autonomy possible? Through which institutional configurations, identity formations, and ideological justifications could the Kurds’ ethno-cultural differences be recognized in practice? These are and were the Kurdish Question(s).

The Kurdish Conflict emerged because the major political actors, primarily the governing political elites, failed to address the Kurdish Question in a manner that could produce sustainable, peaceful, and agreeable solutions for both Kurds and Turks. Hence, while the Kurdish Question was

a product of global historical developments, the Conflict was a product of political decisions and choices, which need to be analyzed and explained.

The claim in this book is that the Kurdish Conflict was not the only “logically or objectively possible”—à la Max Weber—consequence of the Kurdish Question. By drawing on comparisons with other cases, public/political discussions in the formative period, and general theoretical insights, I argue that more accommodative and conciliatory paths were within the realm of logical and objective possibility, which could have prevented the Kurdish Question’s transformation into the Kurdish Conflict.

The rise of nationalism presented difficult challenges to all of the world’s multiethnic and multiconfessional political entities, particularly to empires such as the Ottoman, Qajar, Habsburg, and British. Yet, while the realm of possible responses to these challenges by the ruling elites and the populations they mobilized must have been limited, these challenges were not always met in the same fashion by the governing elites of these polities at different times. What’s more, I will show that the contemporary Ottoman imperial political elites were aware of the different possible and imaginable strategies, as indeed were the nationalists themselves.

In a nutshell, giving a causal explanation of the Kurdish Conflict is almost the same as explaining how the Kurdish Question was transformed into the Kurdish Conflict.

THE “TURKISH QUESTION” AND THE KURDISH CONFLICT

Unpacking the processes that produced the Kurdish Conflict and have been preventing a peaceful resolution of the Kurdish Conflict indicates that they pertain to unresolved divisions of identity, security, and ideology that could be found both among Kurds and Turks, but especially among Turks. In other words, I argue that, to a large extent, the Kurdish Conflict emerged as a byproduct of intra-*Turkish* divisions, conflicts, contradictory ambitions, and feelings of insecurity. Similarly, finding a peaceful resolution has depended on the Turks’ ability to successfully address these issues. Hence, my main, political and ideational explanatory variables that account for the failures to resolve the dilemmas pertain to intra-Turkish political and ideational rifts.

Thus, the Kurdish Question and Conflict and their protracted nature cannot be explained without simultaneously analyzing a Turkish Question: the Turks’ own political struggles in attempting to form a viable and secure national identity and state. The latter involved efforts to

resuscitate the Ottoman/Muslim state project and nationalism based on a reinvented and reconstructed Turkish identity and on particular narratives regarding why and how the Ottoman state disintegrated. These narratives feed Turks' fears of territorial loss and ethnocultural diversity and their ongoing quarrels about how "Turkic," how "Muslim and Islamic," how "Anatolian," how "Western," and how "secular" the Turkish identity and nation-state should be.

Complicating these disputes are two additional and broader challenges. The first one is how to overcome the never-ending search for singular-hegemonic names and meanings of shared identities, places, and social and political categories. The second is how to express in language, live with, and indeed embrace as richness, the social and historical fact of plural, polysemic, polyonymous, and polynomial identities and categories present in Turkey. Indeed, the ethnic/cultural diversity of people who identify themselves as Turks in one way or another is a well-known social and historical fact among (often fiercely Turkish nationalist) Turks as well as non-Turks. However, it has been a challenge for Turks to embrace this based on more pluralistic political values and institutions. Simultaneously, they struggled to find ways to embrace and express it in language, for example in terms of hyphenated identities, such as Bosnian-Turk or Christian-Turk, or, better yet, in some fashion that does not privilege one identity over the other.

Hence, it would not be wrong to say that this book is more about the Turks and the Turkish Question than it is about the Kurds and the Kurdish Question.

The Three Dilemmas and the Explanation in This Book:

Figure 1.1 illustrates my nonstandard causal explanation.

EXTERNAL SECURITY DILEMMA

This dilemma regards—from the point of view of the ruling political elites—the question of how the Kurdish Question can be resolved while at the same time ruling out the possibility of Kurdish secessionism. This dilemma grew out of the partitioning of the former "Ottoman Kurdish" population between three post-Ottoman nation-states: Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. At the beginning of the War of Independence, the independence

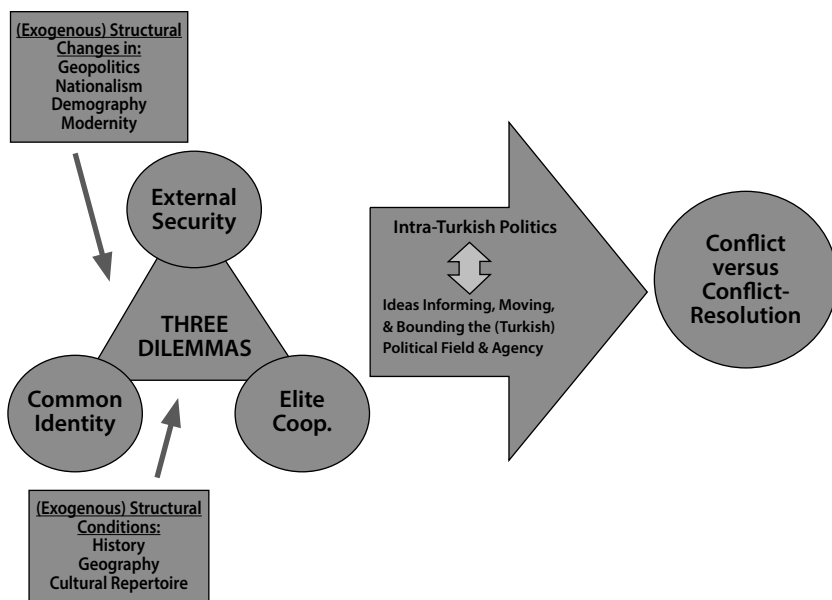


Figure 1.1. Summary illustration of the causal argument.

movement envisaged that most Ottoman Kurds and the territories in which they formed majorities would be included within the nation-state they aimed to establish. Hence, this state would comprise two major ethnic groups not so unequal in size, Turks and Kurds. However, following the war and a period of multilateral negotiations between 1923 and 1926, “Southern Kurds” were left outside of Turkey and remained within the British and French–mandated Iraq and Syria respectively, as decided by the League of Nations. As I will discuss further in chapter 3, there is weak evidence to support Kurdish nationalist claims that Turkish nationalists, or for that matter, secular nationalists led by Mustafa Kemal, *intended* to leave Mosul outside of Turkey. The exclusion of Mosul rendered pan-Kurdish secessionism a potential threat while turning the Kurdish population in Turkey into a smaller and thus more negligible minority for the ruling elites to control. This dilemma continues to exist because the potential of pan-Kurdish separatism²³ has not credibly been eliminated through measures such as a domestic or international political settlement.

I will maintain that one way in which Turks and Kurds might resolve this dilemma is through the “flexible socioeconomic integration”

of Turkey with Kurds in Iraq and Syria. The realization of such a policy would require ideational innovation as well as the formation of particular political elite coalitions I will discuss.

COMMON IDENTITY DILEMMA

This dilemma concerns the challenge of constructing a common identity²⁴ that would simultaneously address Kurdish and Turkish identity-related demands and concerns. The form, if not the essence, of this dilemma has changed since the formative period. In the formative period, the dilemma regarded whether or not a common identity could be found that would simultaneously meet Kurdish nationalists' demands for the recognition of the Kurdish identity and culture in the new Turkey, and the Turkish nationalists' concerns to form a cohesive nation out of the remaining non-Kurdish population that also comprised an ethnically and linguistically diverse lot. In the current period, when there is a well-established national identity and nation-state of Turkey, this dilemma concerns the question of how to reformulate the national identity or reconstruct existing common identities so that the Kurds feel that their identity enjoys equal respect and recognition while the remaining majority of the population, who now zealously identify themselves as Turkish (even though the origins, content, and boundaries of Turkishness remain contested among the Turks themselves), do not feel anxious and defensive about the future and integrity of their own identity.

This dilemma involves an asymmetry between how (a sizeable number of) Kurds and Turks view the Turkish identity. While for many Kurds, Turkishness unquestionably is an ethnic identity, Turks tend to have a more variegated, mixed, and contested image. The reasons for this asymmetry lie in a metamorphosis of Turkishness before and during the formative period. At some point during this process, some elites, whose primary goal was to rescue the Ottoman state and the majority of whom were ethnic Turks, decided to defend their campaign as a "Turkish" rather than a Muslim Ottoman project and as "Turkish" rather than Muslim Ottoman nationalists. In other words, they tasked Turkish nationalism and identity with taking over the roles and "missions" of Ottoman state nationalism and state-national identity. Yet, during this process they did not merely replace a well-established Muslim Ottoman identity with a predetermined Turk identity;²⁵ they also reinvented and transformed the meaning and boundaries of the Turk identity that they wanted to uphold. This new

Turkishness became a broader project in view of its geography and target audience. From then on, and in the eyes of its upholders, the historically preexisting ethnic Turk *category*—which I will define shortly—was transformed into a national *identity* and expected to encompass a multiethnic and, to some extent, multiconfessional population. Such a transformation did not take place with Kurdish nationalists and with Kurdish nationalism and national identity, which remained projects mainly of and for ethnic Kurds and Kurdish speakers.

I will argue that, in order to resolve this dilemma, it may be necessary to formulate and foster a common identity that allows people to embrace it with different names and contents, as in Turkish (*Türk*), which most Turks prefer as the name of the common identity or “of-Turkey”²⁶ (*Türkiyeli*), which many Kurds prefer as the name of the common identity in the country. Clearly, ideational innovation and flexibility—about identities in general and about Turk and Kurd identities in particular—politics and political agency would play key roles in realizing the legal and discursive changes to implement such a policy.

ELITE COOPERATION DILEMMA

This dilemma regards the question of which political actors can work together to address the Kurdish Question, by establishing inter-elite trust and managing inter-elite power struggles over differences not necessarily related to the Kurds. These differences involve ideological disagreements—mainly, but not exclusively, over secularism—and discords over power sharing, which have been more pressing for Turkish elites than the Kurdish Question and Conflict.²⁷

The resolution of the Kurdish Question requires significant elite unity,²⁸ that is, the presence of a group of elites who can agree on certain strategies and reforms and cooperate with each other to implement them, and who are not divided by goals and interests that are more important to these elites than the Kurdish Question. This last condition means that these elites should prioritize the Kurdish Question, that is to say, they should not see their policies vis-à-vis Kurds as an instrument to settle other elite power struggles.

Such elite unity is needed for intra-Turkish, Turkish-Kurdish, as well as intra-Kurdish elite cooperation. My focus will be on the first two elite divisions. The intra-Kurdish elite dilemma is more straightforward. During the formative period, Kurdish elites were suppressed as they were

fragmented, weak, and distant from the masses. Over the course of the republican history, Kurdish elites achieved more unity and support of the masses.²⁹ We will see that this is especially true for secular/leftist Kurds. They have thereby organized greater challenges to the nation-state of Turkey, notably under the violent leadership of the PKK and its political formations during the last three decades or so. Further, and understandably, the Kurdish Question and Conflict were a priority for most Kurdish elites. That is, even though they are by no means immune to power struggles and ideological and other rifts, the Kurdish Question is not instrumental to other objectives for them.

Intra-Turkish elite divisions are more complex. Time and again different elite groupings have instrumentalized the Kurdish Question to achieve domination over other, Turkish elites. Hence, in both the formative and current re-formative periods, the ruling “Turkish”³⁰ elites formed their policies vis-à-vis Kurds primarily with a view to prevailing in intra-Turkish elite struggles, and to achieving elite goals unrelated to the Kurds. For these elites, the Kurdish Question was secondary to other questions, such as the secular-versus-religious nature of the state.

In the formative period, the intra-Turkish dilemma mainly pertained to divisions, first between Islamist/Muslim conservative and secularist elites, and then, following the partial purge of the former from power, between radical revolutionary and moderate evolutionary secularist Turkish elites. I will argue that as the radical revolutionary secularist elites monopolized power and the regime coalesced around their ideas and base in the formative period, the kind of inter-elite cooperation that would be required to address the Kurdish Question also became less and less possible.

Since the formative period, the elite cooperation dilemma has become more multilayered. It still involves a major inter-elite rift between Islamist and secularist elites, and, to some extent, between Muslim conservative³¹ and secularist Turkish elites. In addition, it now involves problems of collective action and consensus building to address the Kurdish Question between “moderate” Turkish and Kurdish actors within each of these political-ideological groupings. As we will see, since the 1960s, and especially since the late 1980s, Kurdish politics has produced many explicitly Kurdish parties and movements while many Kurds have also participated in majority Turkish political parties and movements. In addition, while Kurdish nationalist party politics consolidated behind political parties close to the PKK, Kurdish movements have significantly diversified with new generations of women, youth, ideological orientations, and visions

of peace.³² Hence, in the current period, as I will elaborate in chapter 6, the elite cooperation dilemma also pertains to problems of cooperation between Turkish and Kurdish actors within and across these groupings: for example, between Turkish and Kurdish left-wing actors or between left-wing Turkish and religious conservative Kurdish actors.

Solving this dilemma hinges on legal/political institution building and transformations and the emergence of a more balanced and accountable political system. These, in turn, require political learning, agency, and ideational factors. Ideational gaps between Turkish and Kurdish actors—and the ideational bottlenecks affecting especially Turkish actors—undermine cooperation between nonviolent actors who are otherwise willing to work together. In general, this dilemma underscores how the resolution of the Kurdish Conflict is closely interlinked with the overall question of democratization.

This Book and Current Research on the Kurdish Conflict

OVERCOMING STANDARD EXPLANATIONS

Whether academic or not, every explanation of historical events and developments actually forms a story (a narrative). And, as in every story, these stories also have actors, protagonists, and, often, antagonists. These actors are described as playing specific roles in a chain of events.

“Standard stories”³³ take place between self-propelled actors. They explain the reasons behind the actors’ behavior through the actors themselves, that is, through the actors’ distinctive characteristics and own volition, which are considered evident. Most importantly, standard stories are conveyed in such a way that it seems impossible for events to unfold in any other way.

In contrast, causal, nonstandard stories emphasize—implicitly or explicitly—not only what happened, but also what could have happened. That is, à la Max Weber, they shed light on “counterfactual outcomes”: “outcomes which have not been realized but do not conflict with logical or objective possibilities.”³⁴ This of course does not imply that “anything can happen”; counterfactuals are bound by what we know about how the social world operates, based on history, other empirical evidence, and available theories.

Counterfactuals are the essence of every causal explanation. Being able to state: “A happened because of B” requires being able to state: “If B

is causally relevant and hadn't happened, A wouldn't have transpired (and something else would have happened)," or "A would have happened differently."³⁵ In the background, there is an alternative story in which there is no B, and, hence, A cannot come into being or cannot happen in the same way. Nonstandard stories explain why alternative causal paths—chains of events—did not unfold and why the factual path unfolded the way it did.

The ubiquity of standard stories in academic and popular writings on the Kurdish Conflict is a major factor in itself, which undermines a resolution because they prompt people to search for spurious, unhelpful, or counterproductive remedies. Standard stories mislead people to think of actions, beliefs, and discourses that are actually products of conflict as the causes of the conflict. Hence, they lead people to see actors themselves and their purportedly pre-fixed intentions, identities, and ideologies as the causes of the problem, instead of focusing on institutional reforms, conceptual innovations, and wiser political decisions.

Two standard stories have dominated analyses of the Turkish-Kurdish case.

STANDARD STORY 1: ACTORS WITH PREDETERMINED INTENTIONS

The research that produces this story aims to explore the goals and intentions of the actors during the formative phase by examining historical records and documents. For example, it attempts to understand how Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk, Ataturk), the Young Turks, or Kurdish nationalists *wanted* (or intended) to solve the Kurdish Question.³⁶

In line with this approach, Kurdish nationalists and many other analysts have argued that Turkish or "of-Turkey" nationalists promised a kind of autonomy and equality to the Kurds who joined them during the War of Independence.³⁷ However, they have argued that Turkish nationalists never intended to fulfill this promise.³⁸ As this narrative goes, any promises made were tactical.³⁹ In the words of Mehmet Bayrak,⁴⁰ a Kurdish and "of-Turkey" researcher and intellectual who has published many books on Kurds, Turks, and Alevism:⁴¹

During the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, Kurdistan was actively and officially split into four as a country and a nation. The Kemalist regime had forgotten its previous promises to Kurdistan relating to Kurdistan's autonomy from and equality with Turks in political, social and cultural life and blatantly mani-

fested its *secret aim* to create a uniform society by suppressing the 1925 Kurdish National Resistance Movement: The Kurdish identity was to be eradicated with oppression and by brutal force and a Turkish nation would be created by the hand of the state [emphasis mine].⁴²

According to this narrative, from the very beginning there was a plan to found a Turkish nation-state that was imagined as a homogeneous, mono-ethnic nation-state, namely, a nation-state that disregarded and denied any recognition to ethnic components. There was consensus in this matter among the leaders of the independence movement (including those who were later politically sidelined), and thus, there were no other possibilities. When Turkish nationalists no longer needed the support of the Kurds, they put their plan into practice.⁴³

Other (mainly Turk) authors who critically examine the development of the Kurdish Question from this perspective give less place to the importance and validity of any promises of Kurdish autonomy made by Turkish nationalists. However, they too refer to the statements of the leaders of the time, primarily those of Mustafa Kemal, and attempt to infer the leaders' intentions. This methodology has produced two conclusions: (1) There was no incoherence or fundamental change between the narratives and policies during the war and those after the founding of the Republic;⁴⁴ and (2) both prewar and postwar policies and discourses were natural extensions of Turkish nationalism and of the aim of founding a nation-state.⁴⁵

In the words of one author, "The pluralism of the National Campaign [*Milli Mücadele*] was a consequence of the political requirements of the period. These requirements pushed the nationalist cadres that founded the republic to form alliances they would not sustain after establishing the political order for which they *aimed*. These alliances were made with Muslim-conservative and Islamist groups and non-Turkish Muslim ethnic groups" [emphasis mine].⁴⁶ However, the emphasis in these studies is as much on the intentions of the actors as it is on "the assumed agentic role" of "nationalism," which I will discuss next.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, other writers emphasize as causal factors the intentions of external powers such as Great Britain and the United States, and Kurdish secular-nationalist and Islamist actors.⁴⁸

These studies help us grasp the perceptions of the major social, political, and military actors of the time. However, even the best examples of

such research can only make a limited contribution to building a causal, nonstandard narrative.

A significant number of events as well as the thoughts and intentions of key actors from this turbulent period were not recorded. Further, most of what has reached us today consists of the thoughts and intentions of those actors who came to attain dominant political positions later on. Furthermore, during the National Campaign years, very few participants would have foreseen the founding of the republic or the events that took place afterward. At that time, there were different imaginations and expectations of the future, and, thus, preferences and perceived interests were formed accordingly.

Had events unfolded differently, other actors and their thoughts might have become more influential, potentially creating room for other unthinkable or “unthought” scenarios and dominant narratives. If we fail to include the views of subsequently marginalized actors as part of our explanation, or the views that were not entertained but were possibilities, our explanations will ignore alternative scenarios that were objectively and logically possible.⁴⁹ The process ultimately becomes based on the ostensibly unchanging and determinist intentions of the “winning” and prominent actors. It might be the case that the principal causal factors were those that allowed the winning actors to win, rather than the winning actors’ intentions themselves. These factors could be political, military, or socioeconomic. One should also keep in mind that the National Campaign might have failed, and the Republic of Turkey might not have been founded, without the participation of those who were later politically marginalized. Hence, it would be inadequate to determine the possible “intentions” and goals of Turkish nationalists vis-à-vis Kurds and other ethnic components based on the postwar actions of a smaller set of political elites, which, as I will argue, rose to power as the victors in intra-Turkish political conflicts. Last, but not least, the intentions and visions of the winning actors in this process most likely did not remain stable either. I will make the case in the third and fourth chapters that leading actors’ intentions and plans changed and adjusted to unforeseen and changing circumstances.

Thus, my nonstandard explanation helps overcome a major weakness of extant research on the Kurdish Conflict and the formation of modern Turkey in general: the limited conceptualization of Turkey’s nation-building elites as, more or less, consisting of the revolutionary secularists and notably the persona of Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) alone. More specifically,