EDITURA LUMEN în elita editurilor românești

Available online http://lumenpublishing.com/journals/index.php/jls

e-ISSN: 2067-8509; ISSN-L: 1841-6195

Jurnalul de Studii Juridice

Year X, No. 3-4, December 2017, pp. 57-66

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18662/jls/13

Covered in:
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How to cite: Osman, D. (2017). The Kurdish Issue in Turkish-Syrian Relations. *Jurnalul de Studii Juridice, XII*(3-4), 57-66. https://doi.org/10.18662/jls/13

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to confirm the hypothesis that The Kurds continue to be a key factor in the development of Turkish-Syrian relationship, being used as an instrument of pressure or provocation against the other party. This hypothesis was formulated in a lot of other paper works and reports on the Kurdish issue in relations between Ankara and Damascus, especially for Syria who considered the Kurds an effective weapon against the political will of Turkey in solving the problems that became stringent issues in the matter of bilateral relations in the 90's. The project is a good opportunity to analyze Syrian-Turkish relations and the Kurdish issue from a historical perspective, to reach an objective understanding of the processes that are run now across the two countries in the context of the Syrian civil war. The importance of the Kurdish factor in the balance of powers in the region cannot be denied, as it has been confirmed both by consulting articles and specialized paper works, and by analyzing daily the Turkish and Syrian international press. The results of this analysis allow us designing an important information support to forecast new processes that will affect Syrian-Turkish relations

Keywords:

The Kurdish Workers Party, cooperation, intervention, hostilities

1. Introduction

The Kurdish question may interest a lot of people who don't know what this subject implies. One of the main features of the Kurdish question is the fact that Kurdish people do not have a homeland, being divided into four regions which include parts of Iran, north-eastern Syria, north-eastern Turkey and northern Iraq where Kurds live. With a population that exceeds 40 million people and with different dialects in their spoken (Kurdish) language, Kurds represent a population deprived of several fundamental rights. Furthermore, 20 percent of Turkey's population is Kurdish, representing approximately 23 percent of Kurds worldwide. Ankara has been unable to solve the Kurdish question on its own: its efforts to squelch any movement for self-determination and liberation has been evident both historically, and in their present day policies (Rabar, 2011).

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2. What is the Kurdish question?

The Kurds represent one of the indigenous people of the Mesopotamian plains and the highlands in what are now south-eastern Turkey, north-eastern Syria, northern Iraq, north-western Iran and south-western Armenia. In recent decades, Kurds have exerted a strong influence on some regional developments, especially in their struggle for autonomy within Turkey and playing main roles in the military confrontations in Iraq and Syria, where resisted the advance of the so-called Islamic State (IS) jihadist group (BBC News, 2016).

On its core in the 80's, the Kurdish liberation movement represented a new power challenging western countries and capitalism inside Turkey, and the Middle East at large. This birth of this movement has produced due to systematic discrimination actions against Kurdish community in Turkey. The political representation of the movement is accomplished by The Kurdish Workers Party (PKK). This political movement was founded in 1978 by Abdullah Ocalan, and was later listed as a terrorist organization by the USA and Turkey amongst other countries. In contrast to other political parties, PKK is an armed movement, born out of desperation, which scope is to obtain autonomy for Kurds in Turkey. The Ankara forced the Kurdish community to assimilate, violating many right and liberties, banning the speaking and teaching of Kurdish, forcing many Kurds to exile prior to the establishment of the PKK. Despite this, many Kurds have criticized the PKK for indiscriminate attacks on Turkish civilians in the past, which has resulted in injury, and also death (Rabar, 2011).

Syria's Kurdish community is also quite large, reaching about 2 million inhabitants who founded a proto-secular state structure, with central institutions and minority groups represented in legislative bodies, including Christians. They are the largest group of military forces in the north of Syria, resisting ISIS combatants in the Koban canton, near the borders of Turkey. The United States supported them by aviation forces, this fact confirming the confidence of Americans in Kurds capacity in stabilizing the situation in this region (Popescu, 2015).

Regarding the Kurds in Syria, repression in this country had a much lower intensity, if we compare it with the situation in Turkey and Iraq. In the early 90's, Kurdish community in Syria numbered about 2 million people who lived mainly in Rojava region, divided into three blocks:

1. Afrin Canton (in the West).
2. Kobani Canton (in the Centre).
3. Jazira Canton (in the East).

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In the early 90's, in the new regional context of a relative cooperation, when forces from the region participated together in the operation against Iraq during the Gulf War, Turkey and Syria signed a security agreement in 1992, eliminating all paramilitary bases belonging to groups that affected the interests of both countries (Turkey and Syria) (Fahir, 1995, 12).

Beside the foiling the plans of forming an independent Kurdish state, the Kurdish community is now a force in the Middle East, which the countries in the region and major powers must take into account (even if it does not have a decisive influence on the political context in the Arab states). For example, in Iraq, they have extended autonomy and within a structure which resembles much a state formation that has approximately six million inhabitants, with its capital city at Erbil. The Kurds are also supported by the Western aviation, they are supported with guns by the United States, Germany and France, ensuring a front of about one thousand kilometers in front of the Islamic State Organization. Turkey itself recognized the major impact of Kurdistan, bearing in mind that the oil is exported on this route through the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline (Popescu, 2015).

In Syria, Kurdish community is quite large too, counting about 2 million inhabitants who founded a proto-profan state structure, with central management and legislative bodies where minority groups are also present, including Christians. They are the largest group of military forces in the north of Syria, also confirmed having in mind the defeat of ISIS combatants in the canton Kobané, near the borders of Turkey. The United States supported them with its aviation, which confirms the confidence of Americans in the stabilizing position of the Kurdish community in this region of Syria (Popescu, 2015).

Beyond its ability to contribute in the preservation of stability in the region in the 90's, the Kurdish community was considered by the Turkish as a destabilizing group, which greatly affected Turkey's trade with Syria. In this area, the so-called "smuggling lords" conducted their work intensely (with local authorities as accomplices in Syria). Hence the concern of the states in the region (Turkey, Syria and Iraq to ensure control of borders) (Jordi, 2009, 69).

Least but not last, in Turkey (with a population of 18-20 million Kurds), the Kurdish community is an important political force, which makes that the goals related to Kurdistan to emerge as an essential component for the future of the Middle East (Popescu, 2015).

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3. The PKK elements

On the other hand, rivalries between Damascus and Ankara in the issue of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) still persist in bilateral relations. Turkey stated that in terms of providing assistance to Kurdish minority by Syria, any negotiation on the Euphrates issue is useless. Furthermore, Turkish officials criticize the Syrian policy on its hydrographic basin, especially on the Orontes river, whose operation is done without any concern for the needs of Turkey (Flore, 2013, 47).

Prior to 1998, relations between Turkey and Syria were difficult. The main disagreements were generated by claims on Hatay province, Syrian support for the PKK and water issues (Tigris, Euphrates and Orontes). In order to strengthen their bilateral cooperation, the parties signed an agreement directed against the PKK terrorist organization, and relations have developed in many fields.

Syria sheltered PKK groups from 1984 to 1998 due to Hatay issue and Turkish dam projects on Euphrates, but in autumn of 1998 Damascus backed off, kicking Öcalan (the leader of Kurds) and shutting down PKK camps. This agreement was signed in October 1998, having the following provisions:

1. As of now, Öcalan is not in Syria. Damascus will not allow the Kurdish leader to enter Syria.

2. PKK elements abroad will not be permitted to enter Syria.

3. As of now PKK camps are not operational and definitely will not be allowed to become active.

4. Many PKK members have been arrested and have been taken to court. Their lists have been prepared. Syria presented these lists to the Turkish side.

The signing of this agreement was an important step for both sides. The next bilateral projects were aimed to normalize Ankara-Damascus cooperation in many fields, not only in security policy. But Syria, on the basis of the principle of reciprocity, guaranteed that its representatives will not permit actions aimed at jeopardizing the security and stability of Turkey and which emanate from its territory. Syria will prohibit any supply of weapons, logistic material, financial support to and propaganda activities of the PKK on its territory. By recognizing that the PKK is a terrorist organization, Syria has, alongside other terrorist organizations, prohibited all activities of the PKK and its affiliated organizations on its territory.

The revolt started by the Kurdistan Workers' Party was not stopped by political measures, but through brutal military operations that targeted

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both the insurgents and civilians. A report published by a research committee of the legislature in Turkey in 1998 reveals shocking information to the international community. In the 80's and 90's of the last century, troops subject to Turkish government destroyed 3428 Kurdish villages, forcing three million Kurds to flee the country. Only in Diyabakir, which was the most important point of refuge for the Kurdish community in Turkey, about one million refugees found shelter. Turks' operations resulted in the death of 5,500 civilians, 17,000 Kurds were injured and 2200 schools were destroyed out of a total of 5,000 schools of this kind. The institution responsible for implementing the policy in Turkey is the National Security Council, which gradually became a "state within the state". There were mass arrests among the members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party simply because they were suspected of something. In February 1994, members of the Democracy Party (DEP), a pro-Kurdish political party established in 1993 and dissolved by a constitutional instrument a year later, among whom was Leyla Zana, were arrested. During the 90's, not only insurgents were chased by security forces of Turkey, but also Kurdish parliamentarians, representatives of media and civil society. After the Democracy Party was dissolved, HADEP was founded (People's Democratic Party) in 1994. Four years later, the head of HADEP was arrested, and some party officials. Subsequent events had a great contribution in escalating the disputes that reached its climax during the war in Syria, at least in its current phase.

The Kurds had a similar fate in Iraq too. Following a Kurdish rebel in 1983, which then expanded given the situation of war between Iraq and Iran, repressive measures of the regime in Baghdad followed (especially the late 80's and early 90's), through a campaign of mass execution of Kurds, known as al-Anfal, during which Saddam Hussein ordered the destruction of over 5,000 Kurdish settlements and killing of over 200,000 Kurds. After this harsh repression, intense international reaction followed and people widely discussed that Saddam used chemical weapons against the population.

A moment of confirmation of the importance of the Kurdish factor in the Middle East is the introduction by the member of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Mullah Bakhtiar (July 2005) of the map the "Great Kurdistan". According to Bakhtiar, Kurdistan received legislative approval, based on "historical and geographical records." He warned that the Kurdish people could make some compromises when it comes to the division of ministerial positions or privileges in the composition of the political establishment, but it will never negotiate the "historical borders" of the "Great Kurdistan". Moreover, Bakhtiar says that "*all Kurds from outside Kurdistan will be under the jurisdiction of the Kurdish state*." It is precisely about the assimilation of all populations (including those which are neither Kurdish nor Arabic) in

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"Kurdish family" on the map of "Great Kurdistan". For example, the Syrians were assimilated as "Kurdish" and they invoked a vague linguistic resemblance in supporting this idea.

During the 2000's, Iran and Syria expressed numerous concerns that the Kurdish factor (better said, the continuity of Kurds in those territories and the retaliation borne throughout history) will be used by the United States and Israel as a pretext for the recognition of "Kurds independence". Representing a minority community in both countries, Kurds can become an extremely dangerous factor for the further development of the states mentioned above.

Turkey is no exception, as it has been fighting for decades against the threats generated by Kurdish terrorists. With the support of the United States of America and Israel, the Kurdish leader Barzani may destabilize the entire Middle East, including by imposing excessive maps. Perhaps these claims could be justified a century ago, but not today. Nobody can guarantee that the Arabs and Turkmens will accept this map of Kurdistan, which Bakhtiar and Barzani imagine.

Regardless of the country where they are, the Kurds act through political parties having alike claims:

Table 1. Actors of the Kurdish policy

Democratic Union Party (PYD)	Dominant political party of the Kurdish community in the territory of Syria, which administrates the Rojava region. The ideological basis of the party has strong connections with that of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (although it denies that it would be a branch thereof).
Kurdish National Council (KNC)	Umbrella formation, headquartered in Erbil, including Kurdish Syrian parties which have ideological connections with KDP and PUK in Iraq. PYD is not included.
Regional Kurd Government	Administration, established in 1992 which was officially recognized in 2005, ensuring the government of the semi-autonomous Kurdistan.
Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)	Militant organization, founded in 1978, representing a dominant Kurdish group in Turkey.
Democratic Party of Kurdistan (KDP)	Kurdish party in Iraq, which extended its control over the most important positions within KRG which is in rivalry for a long time with the Kurdistan Workers' Party.

(Curta, 2016, 95-96).

Following the establishment of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, other parties were formed involved in the struggle to obtain rights for the Kurds and final resolution of the Kurdish problems, but most political parties faced

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the same problem, that of associating their image with a branch of PKK. They were outlawed, a decision taken by the members of the Constitutional Court of Turkey. An example of this is the establishment of the Freedom and Democracy Party, which in turn was banned. If the representatives of a Kurdish party attended the election for the Great National Assembly, the result was not favorable, most of the times they did not manage to obtain the minimum 10% required to be part of the Parliament, such as the case of the Popular Democracy Party (HADEP). HADEP situation was not different from that of the parties that preceded it, this party being outlawed by the Constitutional Court of Turkey, and many of the founding members were excluded from political life (Hevian, 2013).

After which in 1998, the Kurdistan Workers' Party was expelled from Syria, former members of the party founded PYD in 2003. PYD is a part of the Kurdish Communities Union (KCK), which is an umbrella party for groups that joined the ideological foundations and objectives of the Kurdistan Workers' Party. When the uprising started in Syria, Kurdistan Democratic Party was among the many players in the political life of Syria inhabited by Kurds. However, its progress in the next period, exploiting the situation of war was remarkable. Among the specific factors that were behind the progress of PYD, we include discipline, organization and strategic planning, which differentiate them from the other Kurdish parties that were split in the long run. An analyst specialized in the Kurdish issue claims: "*The connection with the PKK also gave it a distinct ideology and access to training, experience, fighters and weapons. By the summer of 2012, while Syria was facing segregation between different militant factions, PYD definitely acted in order to gain control of three pieces of territory where the Kurds were the majority in the northern part of the country: Jazira, Koban and Afrin*" .

On the territory of the so-called western Kurdistan, we are witnessing to a reproduction on a smaller scale of Iraqi Kurdistan, a process that is under the control of PYD (Democratic Unity Party). This configuration is a Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which Carnegie Endowment considers one of the most important parties of the Syrian opposition. During the civil war after the "Arab Spring" in several countries in the region, Syrian Kurds asserted their own "Spring" and established a micro-Kurdish state in the north of the country, in Rojava, 2012 after Bashar al-Assad withdrew his forces. Thus, they became one of the central factors of change in Syria which is at war (Gunes, Lowe, 2015, 3).

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4. Future perspectives in Turkish-Syrian cooperation

In this context, the Kurdish factor greatly influences the course of Turkish-Syrian relations. The main obstacles to the development of bilateral relations, depending on the type of threats, are:

- Kurdish resistance movement, organized around the Workers' Party of Kurdistan;
- Syrian support for the Kurdish community representatives, to influence Turkey in making certain decisions in the sphere of diplomatic relations with the authorities in Damascus;
- The phenomenon of smuggling near the regions inhabited by Kurds on Syria's territory (trafficking of arms, drugs, oil, food);
- Illegal migration of Kurds.

Before the outbreak of popular protests in March 2011 in Syria, Turkey aimed to approach the Syrian administration first on a bilateral basis in order to convince the international community that Syria could not be isolated from the impact of the winds of change and transformation which had then started to engulf the region. Since the beginning of the conflict Turkey continued to accept refugees from Syria with less discrimination than other countries. As of June 2016, over 2,7 million Syrian with diverse backgrounds live in Turkey under the "temporary protection status", according to the "1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees"(AFAD).

On the other hand, extremists and terrorists take root and expand as the ongoing conflict provides a fertile ground for foreign fighters and activities of terrorist organizations. It is certain that the Kurdish question is not a resolved issue. There are many measures to be taken for that. The war in Syria may push to Turkey many Kurdish refugees. Among so many civilians that flee war, you may find real extremists who seek independence and creation of Kurdistan. This fact may cause a lot of security problems for Turkey.

Conclusions

Referring to the Kurdish society, we see that disunity, lack of political and cultural unity, ideological and interest conflict generated by the tribal system, geographical distribution of the population generated several factors that led to the impossibility of establishing Kurdistan. The fact that the Kurdish population was deprived of its educated elite, required to any population which aims at satisfying its cultural fulfillment, caused a number

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of issues, including economic and political problems, the alleged Kurdistan area being underdeveloped compared to the rest of Turkey or Syria.

At the same time, the failure of the Kurds to establish their state and the cultural failure is due to the attitude of the authorities in Turkey and Syria. Regardless of the level of disunity within Kurdish population, we were able to witness a number of unification attempts and their fight for a common goal. However, draconian and nationalist reforms of the Turkish state, the indifference of the international community after the First World War regarding the situation of the Kurds, and that of the European Union regarding the negotiations for the integration of Turkey into the European community, and outlawing for several times of the Kurdish groups and organizations, led to the discontinuation process of forming a strong Kurdish identity, as Kurds are still fighting today for its recognition as a minority and to obtain their rights as promised.

Acknowledgement

My scientific coordinator from Faculty of History, Mr. Gheorghe Vlad Nistor, PhD, has been a very appreciated thesis supervisor. His attitude, insightful criticisms, and patient encouragement determined me to identify as many sources as possible to confirm the hypothesis expressed in this paper. I would also like to thank my friends from Revista 22 for helping me construct a very solid historical approach. Their support of this paper was greatly needed and deeply appreciated.

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