

Mapping the Pathways: Public Perception and Kurdish Question

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ABSTRACT

The Kurdish initiative announced by the governing Justice and Development Party has increased the discussions on the proper ways and forms of dealing with the Kurdish question in Turkey. The announcement acted as an opening of Pandora's box through which all different images of the problem began to be manifested simultaneously. Assuming that the public perception would have a direct impact on the trajectory of the implementation of the initiative, this essay examines different aspects of the public perception of the issue by relying on the findings of a joint survey conducted by SETA and Pollmark. It is contended that effective settlement of the Kurdish question requires encountering and resolving certain tensions in the public perceptions, which can be done by achieving a language in which the grammar of politics and the values that maintain social integration is more transitional and interdependent.

There is no doubt that since the early years of Republic, the Kurdish Question has been one of the most controversial problems in Turkey. The state, either implicitly or explicitly has always been attentive to the issue and no matter how much similar or different they are, several methods have been implemented in dealing with the question.¹ Today, the situation continues to be so with the fact that the question begins to gain new dimensions and become more complex than ever.

Certain developments have been effective in this process. The changes in political structure of the Middle East since the early 1990s, the impact of violence inflicted through the Kurdish question on social relations and political stability in Turkey and the rise of a distinct Kurdish political subject are some of them. Nonetheless, in parallel with the increasing intricacy of the Kurdish Question, attempts to deal with the problem simultaneously have

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become more complex and challenging than ever. The process of structural normalization of domestic politics in Turkey since the early 2000s, the rise of Turkey's foreign policy activity and its effect in the Middle East and Turkey's desire and relative success to maintain a political stability laid the ground for such an intervention.² Intertwined together, both

the increasing complexity of Kurdish issue and the need for the consolidation of further political normalization in Turkey have increased the urgency to deal with the Kurdish question. This context not only enabled but also compelled the governing JDP (Justice and Development Party) to declare a specific initiative toward resolution of the Kurdish issue.

The initiative is presented as a deliberative process rather than a realization of a ready-made package by the JDP, with "the intention to achieve a national consensus" toward the settlement of the issue. Although up to this time, it is not clear whether the consensus will be achieved or not, the very afterwards of the declaration present several signs to understand and forecast both potential troubles that may be encountered and aspects that need to be taken into consideration in the process of dealing with the Kurdish question.

Public Perception and the Initiative

One way to reveal these signs is to dig into the public perception of the Kurdish issue. In doing that I rely on SETA and Pollmark's recent research, entitled "Public Perception of the Kurdish Question".³ The survey was carried out between 7 and 15 August 2009, following the declaration of the Kurdish initiative, through which all aspects of the public perception that have been informed by and influenced through the aforementioned processes become visible.

In this framework, the present political context is of crucial importance since the declaration has functioned as a constitutive framework through which both the legacy and future of the Kurdish issue is being contested. This is because the declaration has intensified the contestation on the meaning and scope of the Kurdish question. In this sense, the announcement triggered the whole public memory/images on the Kurdish question to be flooded into the discussions. Throughout this contestation, there has been unfolding of the whole public perception of the Kurdish question. The continuous increase in the discussions on the Kurdish issue and the greater importance attributed to the problem verify that the initiative

acted as an opening of Pandora's box. Marking a rupture moment, the very act of announcement began to re-write and re-encounter the whole memory of the problem in the public perception.

In this sense, the findings of SETA and Pollmark's survey should be treated not merely as empirical data but as pathways, which display the whole imprint of legacies of Kurdish question on the public perception. A focused examination on the findings of the research, I believe, sheds some lights on mapping potential pathways in dealing with the Kurdish issue.

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Mapping the Public Perception

Looking through the survey, one may argue that tension between the expectation for a political resolution and the presence of a sense of fear and anxiety is the most essential feature that characterizes the public perception of the Kurdish question.

On the one hand, the public attributes a crucial importance to the Kurdish question (55.3%) and the issue is identified as one of the most crucial *political* problem in Turkey (16.2%). Further, the majority of the public (71.1%) believes that 'the policies implemented in the last 25 years against terrorism' have not been successful. In the same line, there is a solid support to the "Kurdish initiative" compared to those who find the initiative "negative" (48.1% and 36.4 respectively). Moreover, in the public perception, there is a clear call for political parties and legitimate political arenas such as Grand National Assembly of Turkey in taking an active role in the process of resolution of the Kurdish question (59.9%).⁴

Contrary to the positive expectation and support toward political resolution of the Kurdish question, the public perception turns into a negative form when it comes to the questions concerning to specific political reforms such as the constitutional recognition of Kurdish identity and language, and lifting the bans on the use of Kurdish language. In these questions, the findings display that there is not only a lack of support to specific reforms, but also a sharp difference between ethnic identities. For instance 65.2% of all the respondents find the constitutional recognition of the Kurdish identity for the settlement of Kurdish question as unacceptable. In terms of ethnicity 73.9 % of Turks reject the recognition while 67.3% of Kurds approve the statement. Furthermore, 45.8% of the respondents

do not approve the removal of prohibitions on the use of the Kurdish language. In this question too there is a marked difference in terms of ethnicity as contrary to the Kurds (78.2%) who approve the removal of prohibitions, majority of Turks (52%) do not approve it. From these findings, one may deduce that fear and anxiety becomes the key emotions, which enframes public perception. The only exception here is the realized reform (the launching of TRT-6), which gets a solid support (51.1%) from the public.⁵

The findings display that there is a growing expectation for the implementation of new methods, other than security-oriented approaches. Yet, the language of rights and reforms does not seem to provide adequate incentive in persuading the public. Rather, public memory, sharply divided across the ethnic lines in questions concerning reforms, is characterized by certain fears and anxiety formed through images of recent history both domestic and international. This does not intend to underestimate the effective function or value of rights and reforms in the resolution of the Kurdish question, as it can be seen from the findings, there is a growing demand for political resolution of the question and the realized reforms are getting crucial public support. Nonetheless, the findings display that the language of rights and reforms by itself cannot seal the gap emerged in the public perception.

The question is what to do and how to seal the gap. An immediate answer to this question might be to call for innovative strategies in public diplomacy and communication to dispel fear and anxieties obstructing further reforms. The support given to political resolution of the question legitimizes such a direction. Further, given the fact that the discussions on the Kurdish question have always been subject to securitization processes and there has been little space to examine different aspects of the issue until recently, the need to implement new communication and persuasion strategies might be an essential requirement. Nonetheless, these findings I believe, reveal a more significant problem, which needs to be taken into consideration in the resolution of the Kurdish question. This is where the disparity between political concerns and social integration need to be examined.

Convergences Versus Divergences

In terms of the social integration, findings of survey leave no space for comments. There is 'a multilayered and multidimensional social integration between the Turks and the Kurds'. For instance, the findings show that opinions of Turks and Kurds towards each other are positive (57.1% and 86.4% respectively) and there is a sense of trust in the everyday life. 59.4% of Turkish respondents have a



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close Kurdish friend and 75.5% of them look favorably at such a relationship. ‘Of the Kurdish respondents, 83.6% say that they have a close Turkish friend and 92% claim that they can become a close friend to a person of Turkish origin’. Perhaps more important than the fact of the social cohesion, there is an almost solid consensus among Turks and Kurds on shared values for social integration across the ethnic lines. For 85% of the respondents social unity is and should be constructed around shared beliefs, values, sense of brotherhood and history (84.8% of Kurds and 83.9% of Turks).⁶

Nonetheless, in the questions concerning the sources of Kurdish question, the political reforms and political aims of Kurds, there is a marked difference along the ethnic identities. For instance concerning the sources of Kurdish question, while Kurdish respondents refer to discrimination, state policies and socio-economic reasons in explaining the issue (73.8%); Turkish respondents either refer to socio-economic reasons, terrorism and foreign powers (52.7%) or believe that no such problem exists (19.6%).⁷

To put it succinctly while the questions inquiring social aspects verify the presence of a powerful social integration among the Kurds and Turks, the questions inquiring specific political subjects or issues reveals the presence of an increasingly suspenseful political difference between the Turks and Kurds. The trouble here is not the presence of differences between the perceptions of political issues/ aims per se, but the way in which the differences unfold themselves. Since the *perception of political aims* is characterized by a certain amount of mistrust. While majority of Turks state that the Kurds want to have a separate state, majority of Kurdish respondents think otherwise. Here it is possible to deduce that the strong resistance to specific reforms amongst the Turks can be attributed to the perception that the reforms are seen as minor steps towards dissolution of Turkey. Furthermore, among the respondents of the survey, almost 20% of Turks believe that there is no such issue defined as “Kurdish question”.⁸ By taking these findings into consideration it is possible to contend that there is a clear disparity between social integration and political concerns.

The disparity might be treated as a political condition that compels to implement an immediate resolution of the Kurdish issue since the remaining option is growing of mistrust and fear between the ethnic groups, which may disrupt the existing social integration. In that sense, resolution of the question becomes a structural security requirement in the present context.

However, the essential problem here is the lack of convergence between the presence of social integration and the way in which political concerns are framed. It seems that social integration and the values that maintain social integration have not been adequately translated into a political language. Therefore, the essential task toward the settlement of the Kurdish question should be to find a way to do this, since the aforementioned aspects of public perception have already created a political-social space which can be exploited and mobilized against the resolution of the issue.

One way to do this, rather than calling to deploy the common sense toward de-politicization of the Kurdish issue, is to politicize the common sense in a way that takes political problems into a serious consideration. The grammar of politics and the values that maintain social integration need to be more transitional and interdependent. This of course is a matter of achieving a sustainable relationship between vision of community, its political representation, ethnic troubles and political pluralism, which requires more than a “nativist” response. What is required is a strategic intervention alongside innovative conceptual framing of the trouble, which is the task of political theory not of daily politics and empirical thinking.

Conclusion

The will to resolve the Kurdish question cannot simply be realized through good faith or the implementation of specific reforms. Doing this requires one to deal with the tensions that characterize public perception and they need to be encountered and resolved. The very announcement of the initiative, in that sense, has created a space in which these tensions are revealed and displayed in the public perception. In that sense, Turkey now is passing through the most difficult times in dealing with the Kurdish question. However, simultaneously the given context is the most promising one as it enables the public to encounter the different aspects of the Kurdish question.

Relying on the findings of joint survey by SETA and Pollmark, I have argued that one way to reduce the tensions and expand the political space toward a resolution is to achieve a language in which the grammar of politics and the values that maintains the social integration becomes more transitional and interdependent. To achieve such a language, I argued, will reduce both the gap between the expectation of political resolution and the language of reforms on the one hand and the discrepancy between social integration and political concerns on the other. Since, it is only through such a language that the public's expectation for the implementation of political resolution of the issue can be translated into a political will in a way without creating a counter-bloc against reform and rights.

Endnotes

1. Taha Özhan, Hatem Ete, *Kürt Meselesi ve Çözüm Önerileri*, (SETA Analiz, November 2008) and Hatem Ete *22 Temmuz'dan 29 Mart'a Siyasal Partiler: Örgüt ile Parti olma Geriliminde DTP*, (SETA Analiz, March 2009).

2. Cemalettin Haşimi, "Ulusalçılık: Kamalism's Last Stand", *MuslimNews*, www.muslimnews.co.uk/paper/index.php?article=3072 (July 2007).

3. Bülent Aras, Ertan Aydın, Selin M. Bölme, et al. *Public Perception of the Kurdish Question in Turkey* (SETA&Pollmark, 2009). Both Turkish and English editions of the survey are available to the public. In the survey a total of 10.577 respondents were sampled and the survey was conducted in 12 regions in Turkey. For detailed information on the methodology of the survey see the Turkish version of the research.

4. For the relevant questions see Question-1 and 18 and questions from 6 to 13.

5. For the relevant questions see question-17 and questions from 19 to 21.

6. For the relevant questions see chapter 7 in the survey and questions 1-2, 4-5.

7. For the relevant questions see Question-3 and questions from 19 to 25.

8. For the relevant questions see Question-3 and 22. Also see Hatem Ete, Ertan Aydın, "Kurds are Unable to Convince Turks They do not Want a Separate State", *Today's Zaman*, September 9, 2009.

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