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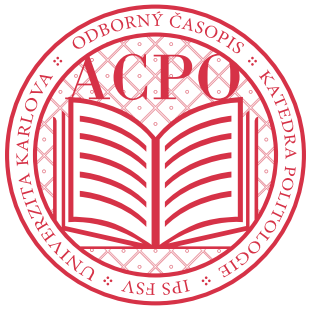

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The Kobani Events and Contesting Political Discourses on the Kurdish Question in Turkey

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Abstract:

From October 6–8, 2014, following a call by the pro-Kurdish party to protest against the Turkish government's alleged indifference to the situation in Kobani, protests and violent clashes took place in many provinces of Turkey. In order to contribute to the understanding of the long-running ethnic conflict in Turkey, this paper addresses the contesting political discourses on the Kurdish question by focusing on those events. It comparatively analyzes the selected speeches of the leaders during and immediately after the Kobani events. Applying critical discourse analysis as a conceptual and analytical framework, it concludes that the Kurdish political movement builds its discourse on the ethnic difference and reinforces it with resistance against alleged state pressure and discrimination against the Kurds, while the AK Party's discourse prioritizes a Muslim fellowship and supports it with promises of social and economic progress.

Key words: *Turkey; ethnicity; identity; discourse; Kurdish question*

Introduction

Turkey's Kurdish question transformed into an armed conflict after the first attacks by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the Southeastern provinces in 1984. Yet, a chain of pro-Kurdish political parties with strong links to the PKK have also been a reality in Turkish politics. After each Kurdish political party was outlawed and banned by the Constitutional Court, a new one was formed in the same political tradition (Gürbüz 2016). Established in October 2012, the People's Democratic Party (HDP) was the last link in this chain; nevertheless, the party employed a new approach, strategy and discourse which go beyond a focus on the Kurdish issue. This new road map, called '*Türkiyelileşme*', had aspirations to transform the party through a pluralist approach into a movement which would represent the whole of Turkey. It was envisaged as an umbrella political party for the leftist movements in the country, and instead of a struggle for the rights and freedoms of the Kurds, this party laid claim to the democratization of Turkey entirely. The party manifests a programme which declares its solidarity with all deprived and oppressed sectors of the society, and opposes its surrender to racist, nationalist, militarist, sexist, conservative and capitalistic forces. In the programme, the party labels itself '*the democratic and peaceful forces of Turkey*' (HDP Programı).

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Nevertheless, the Kurdish issue in Turkey has ramifications beyond the country's borders since there are significant Kurdish minorities and PKK networks in Iraq, Iran and Syria (Larrabee 2013); and the PKK has strong and organic ties especially with the one in Syria (Stein and Foley 2016). Thus, the Kurdish political movement was observing the situation in that country with a special interest. When the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is a Kurdish political party (recognized as a terrorist group by Turkey) founded in Northern Syria in 2003 and has close ties to the PKK, took control of the region as a consequence of the withdrawal of the Syrian government from northern Syria, it was seen to a large extent as an important acquisition and a remarkable step for the emancipation of Kurds by this movement (Köse 2017). Therefore, when the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the middle of September 2014 launched a siege on Kobani which was the central one of three de facto autonomous cantons under PYD control in northern Syria, it had a deep emotional impact on the supporters of the pro-Kurdish party. Turkey had given shelter to 200,000 refugees fleeing ISIS attacks, according to a speech by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on October 7 (Habertürk 2014). However, the Kurdish political movement was demanding more from the government, such as opening a military aid and support corridor from the other regions under PYD control since the only exit from the siege was the Turkish border. Viewing the PYD as an extension of the PKK and the battle as between two terrorist groups (Gunes and Lowe 2015; Parlar Dal 2016), the government was reluctant to take such direct actions to help it and some street protests had begun in the middle of September 2014 on a small scale in opposition to the government's view. The situation exacerbated after the Central Executive Committee of the HDP made an urgent call for demonstrations in solidarity with Kobani on the morning of October 6. Moreover, the sentence '*Kobani is about to fall*' in the same speech by Erdoğan on October 7 was interpreted by pro-Kurdish party supporters as his real intent and worsened the predicament. The protests and demonstrations turned violent when the protesters confronted police and some dissident groups. During the events, many street clashes between HDP supporters and the police, as well as between Free Cause Party (Hüda-Par)[2] supporters and Turkish nationalist groups, were reported. The related report by the Human Rights Association proclaimed that 46 people lost their lives during the violent events between October 7 and 12 (İnsan Hakları Derneği 2014). According to Anadolu Ajansı (AA), which is a state-run news agency of Turkey, 33 people including 2 police officers lost their lives in the '*6–7 October events*' (as the process was called), and 360 people were wounded including 139 police officers (Anadolu Ajansı 2015).[3]

As a political movement, the HDP describes itself as democratic, peaceful and anti-nationalist; however, the party called upon people to react and demonstrate against a circumstance related to a kin ethnic group beyond the borders of Turkey, and this call triggered the protests, which turned violent throughout the country. Therefore, the events presented opportunity to see how the party syncretises its alleged anti-nationalist stance and ethnic emphasis on Kurdish identity in the same political position. On the other hand, in spite of introducing an unprecedented approach to and a new language on the Kurdish question during its rule, the AK Party constantly needs to prove legitimacy in the eyes of the Kurds against the political movements that claim to represent the Kurdish identity. Preserving a balance between the integrity of Turkey and recognition of the particular situation of

[2] A Kurdish Sunni Islamist political party. It will be shortly examined later in the paper.

[3] The disagreement on the numbers is mostly due to the incompatibility of the time period which they consider.

the Kurdish identity is a crucial task for the party, and the Kobani events allow us to examine how the party fulfills such a task. Considering these points, this paper analyzes the Kobani events as a case by focusing on the discourses of the rival political parties in the course of and immediately after the events. In this way, it aims to contribute to the understanding of the Kurdish question by unveiling the discursive power struggle on the Kurdish identity in Turkey.

In the course of the study, firstly an overview of the Kurdish nationalist movement alongside the rival actors are given in order to make sense of the different discourses within a context. In the following part, both the rationale behind and application of the research methodology and data selection are explicated, as is why this research methodology also provides a theoretical framework for the research. Afterwards, the selected speeches are analyzed and the outcomes discussed within the wider framework of the Kurdish question in Turkey.

Making Sense of Discourses on the Kurdish Identity: An Overview of the Kurdish Nationalist Movement and Rival Actors

Kurdish nationalist movements roughly began with the politicization and mobilization of the local Islamic networks as a reaction to the centralization of the Ottoman state and the penetration of European capitalism in the late 19th century. They continued as movements of resistance to Mustafa Kemal's nation-building project out of a multi-ethnic and multicultural Ottoman heritage in the republican era (Yavuz 2001). The rebellions stemming from demands related to recognition of the Kurdish identity and maintenance of autonomous tribal structures in the region were severely suppressed. The insurgencies and opposition to the new secular regime possessed densely religious motifs. The secularization of the Kurdish opposition began in the 1960s with the Kurdish youth's concern over economic inequalities and other socialist themes leading to their involvement in leftist groups (Yavuz 2001; Ökem 2006). By the 1980s, it headed towards a separatist violence within the condition of the coup d'etat, and the atmosphere of the military-dominated political arena in Turkey. On the state side, the Özalist neo-liberal policies of the late 1980s helped ignite deliberation about Kurdish unrest by breaking the state's monopoly over information, and, to some extent, facilitated new and unconventional ways of thinking over the relationship between national identity and citizenship in Turkey (Ercan Argun 1999). However, the failure remains in its application of universal citizenship rights and a territorially defined civic idea of nation, which has nurtured the anti-assimilationist discourse of the Kurdish identity.

The 1990s witnessed severe clashes between the state and the PKK which had enlarged its standing within the Kurdish population via in-group and out-group violence. Yet, the religious character of the Kurdish populated region has always been a serious problem for both military and political organizations of the leftist-secular Kurdish opposition. The priorities of the secular Kurdish movement have not always been shared by Kurdish Islamists who has had remarkable grassroots support and religion has been one of the two remarkable elements of Kurdish politics (Çiçek 2013; Tezcür 2009). As Çiçek (2013) remarks, although the Kurdish movement also includes some liberal and pro-Islamic groups, that does not reflect its internal diversity in political representation; rather, it is dominated by socialist and nationalist groups. That has been a vulnerable side of the movement.

In this sense, the AK Party's coming to power was a milestone in terms of Kurdish politics. Erdoğan's speech in Diyarbakır in August 2005 was an open step to acknowledge the Kurdish question, which had long been ignored. In that speech, he declares that the state

recognizes the Kurdish question as a problem concernin the entire country, and he vows to solve it (Aktürk 2018). The programme and steps taken by the party, such as creating an official Kurdish TV channel and establishing programmes at universities to teach and research Kurdish, were progressive and brave when compared to anything proposed by rival political parties (Larrabee 2013; Gunes and Lowe 2015). This situation is a consequence of the party's conviction that the forced secularism and type of Turkish nationalism pushed by the Kemalist ideology are the reasons behind the Kurdish question, while the official state position regarded the Kurdish question as a problem of terrorism stemming from the region's socio-economic backwardness (Sarıgil 2010). The AK Party placed great emphasis on '*Islamic fellowship*' as a common feature which has united the Kurdish people with the rest of Turkey, and this approach has received a positive response making it the main competitor against pro-Kurdish parties in the Kurdish-populated region (Arıkan Akdağ 2016). The '*Kurdish opening*' in 2009 and the reconciliation process launched in 2013 were the outcomes of such an atmosphere although the clashes between the state and the PKK also continued in that period. After negotiations involving the pro-Kurdish party, the imprisoned PKK leader, and the government, additional steps were taken, such as the enactment of some relevant laws and withdrawal of some armed PKK groups from the territory of Turkey to neighbouring countries. Nevertheless, there were still a few points of tension which were not given sufficient attention. First, while the AK Party reduces the Kurdish question to a problem of cultural identity and proposes individual cultural rights, and complements this policy with the rhetoric of Islamic fellowship, the demands of the Kurdish movement lay stress on political and administrative decentralization, which involves sharing sovereignty and achieving collective cultural rights through what is called a democratic autonomy (Çiçek 2013: 160). Second, as Kayhan Pusane (2014) points out, divisions on both sides, namely a number of power centres affecting the process on the Kurdish side and a lack of a consensus with the opposition parties on the government side, becloud communication. As to the last point, the sides did not sufficiently reckon the fact that the Kurdish question is not limited only to Turkey, and that the civil war in Syria has both intentional and unintentional spillover effects (Parlar Dal 2016).

The last point touched is clearly connected with the Kobani events in Turkey. The pro-Kurdish party was calling on Kurdish people to raise their voices to the tough situation of their ethnic kin; however, the violence and loss of civilian life were mainly caused by clashes between them and members of another Kurdish movement and political party. At this point, we have to address this movement, Hüda-Par, as the last of the actors in the events.

Hüda-Par is considered a continuation of the Hezbollah movement established in 1979 on an ideology in which Sunni Islamist emphasis and Kurdish identity come into prominence. In the 1990s, the movement entered into a severe war with PKK. In 2000, the state increased pressure on the organization; its leader was killed by an operation carried out by the Turkish police; thousands of its members were arrested and most then imprisoned (Koç and Palabıyık 2016).

Kurt (2017: 142–143) contends that Hezbollah reframed Islamic understandings and practices, with which the Kurds were familiar, by using a radical Islamist discourse. By means of violence in their disputes, Hezbollah eliminated other Islamist groups, and this practice resembles those the PKK used against other left-wing organizations in the region. Since both organizations were made up of Kurdish people in the region, confrontation was unavoidable, resulting in the death of hundreds on each side. Although there is a widely held belief in

the nationalist Kurdish movement that Hezbollah was established and/or reinforced by the Turkish state, Kurt remarks that this cannot be validated or refuted. Moreover, Hüda-Par has rigorously rejected this claim. In addition, members of the movement stated that they were the victims of the '*deep state*' which blames the movement for illegal acts in fact committed by undercover agents (Gürbüz 2016). Moreover, Hezbollah justifies its position against the PKK and HDP due to the secular and socialist ideological structure of these movements, which are against the moral values and religion of Kurdish people. Thus, the PKK's fight for the hegemony of such an ideology serves Hüda-Par and the movement which encompasses it to legitimize their positions and acts as self-defence (Yaşaroğlu 2015: 99–100).

On one hand, this movement was accusing its rivals, the PKK and HDP, of enmity against the religion; on the other hand, the pro-Kurdish party supporters were viewing Hezbollah and Hüda-Par as other representatives of radical Islamist ideology and similar to ISIS in this way. Thus, when the HDP called its supporters to go out and hold the streets, the rage which was actually targeted at the indifference of the state to the events caused by ISIS was redirected towards supporters of Hüda-Par, and caused painful incidents.

Hüda-Par is not one of the two main actors whose discourses are analyzed in this paper although it is one of the grassroots actors in the region. This can be defended due to the movement's low support among voters, presence in only some Kurdish-populated provinces, and lack of a proper public representation or regular relations with the media. However, contemplating Hüda-Par in the context of rivalries and power struggles over the region and the Kurdish question is still necessary in order to make sense of the events.

Research Design, Methodology and Theoretical Concerns

Discussing the actors involved both in the events and in Kurdish politics, the previous part provides a frame in which to conceive the Kurdish question and related events. In the following part, the focus will be narrowed to the case of the Kobani events; the power struggles and control over the representation of the Kurdish people and Kurdish identity through the events will be analysed. Since it is a substantial indicative of any power struggle, discourse is what this study focuses on in order to analyse the events and the Kurdish question in conjunction with it. As the main research frame, it draws on an approach which is obtained from critical discourse analysis (CDA). This choice entails some further clarification in terms of what CDA is, why I choose it and how I carry it out. Such clarification also gives insight as to why I deal with the research frame and theoretical concerns under the same title.

Critical Discourse Analysis as a Research Frame

First of all, it would be wrong to consider CDA simply as a research method, since it is also a theoretical perspective on social reality. I would like to analyse the Kobani events which constitute a case including protests, violent events, and street clashes through some significant speeches related to the issue. This preference is based on a conviction regarding social reality which I would like to set forth through a quotation:

> *"There are no social events or practices without representations, construals, conceptualizations or theories of these events and practices; or, to put it in*

> *different terms, that social realities have a reflexive character, ie. the way people see and represent and interpret and conceptualize them is a part of these realities"* (Fairclough 2012: 9).

Fairclough actually draws attention to a long tradition within critical social analysis through these words, but his explanation also lays the ground for analysis of discourse as both a product and producer of social reality.

Led by Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak and Teun van Dijk, critical discourse analysis (CDA) appeared in the late 1980s (Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000). CDA is usually regarded as a research programme, rather than a single or specific theory, due to the methodological and theoretical variability and loosely interconnected different approaches in its corpus (Wodak 2002; Wodak and Meyer 2008; Fairclough 2012; Van Dijk 2015). Yet, the important figures in CDA share a notion of discourse that it is both socially constitutive and socially conditioned (Wodak 2002: 7–8). In other words, the discourse in CDA corresponds to a social practice which constitutes the elements of social world situations, institutions, events, social identities, relationships among people or people groups in a dialectical relationship while it is also a product of theirs. Wodak and Meyer (2008: 10) state that it is '*fundamentally interested in analysing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language*'. Fairclough (1992: 36) indicates that discourse analysis is not concerned only with power relations or struggle in discourse, but also with how these struggles form and transform the discourse practices of a society and institution.

As a specific set of tools, the one proposed by a prominent CDA scholar Gee (2011: 28–30) will be implemented in the analysis of the texts. Although Gee admits that it is only one of the ways to carry out discourse analysis, he defines four tools of inquiry "relevant to how people build identities and practices and recognize identities and practices that others are building around them" to use in the analysis of any piece of oral or written language. These tools are social languages, discourses, conversations, and intertextuality. As Gee treats them, social language reflect the usage of '*different varieties of language to enact and recognize different identities in different settings*', while discourse gains a meaning corresponding to a compound of verbal and non-verbal aspects (deeds, beliefs, objects, times, place, etc.) of language. Conversation refers to relations or allusions of any language used in themes, motifs or debates with which some groups or an entire society are familiar. Intertextuality denotes references to any other (spoken or written) text.

As the data to be analysed with these tools, the five speeches in total given in a one week period after the events by Selahattin Demirtaş, the leader of the pro-Kurdish party, and by President Erdoğan are taken. Of course, the selection of these names is far from random. The first name is the top authority in the HDP to put the standings of the Kurdish movement into words; therefore, his speeches have a central role in making sense of the events, so taking him into consideration for the analysis is self-explanatory. Erdoğan's rhetoric is selected to reflect the position of the state to the events and to construe the discourse of the government vis-à-vis the Kurdish opposition movement in an interaction according to their positions. Although there are more speeches made by Erdoğan in the week following the events[4], the one in which he allocates more time to address the Kobani

[4] President Erdoğan gave three other speeches in the opening ceremonies (on October 10 in Trabzon, on

events is selected with the purpose of having more material to analyze through the logic of purposive sampling. As another point, instead of the news in the newspapers which publish the speeches fragmentally or in a limited way, the speeches are drawn from the videos presenting them in full.

As the last point to state, the context previously given should be kept in mind since it will often be referenced in the analysis. Ellis (2007: 25) puts forward that both for the minority and for the majority groups, the language used represents a taken-for-granted expression of forms of interaction and knowledge and their characteristic communicative patterns can be understood only within the wider cultural and historical contexts of their respective societies. The difference and inequality between the positions of the speakers must be contemplated along with their discourses.

The Rival Discourses on the Events and the Kurds in Turkey

I will begin with the speeches given by the aforementioned leaders on October 7 while the street protests were still going on. In order to stay in chronological order, I start with Erdoğan's speech on a visit to a refugee camp in Islahiye (near the Syrian border) on October 7 at noon. Erdoğan began his speech by greeting the audience, which mainly consisted of Syrian refugees, and celebrating their Eid al-Adha (sacrifice feast) in Arabic. He summarized the situation stating that Turkey had given shelter to one and half million refugees to date, had spent 4 billion dollars on them, and with the last wave, some 200,000 Syrians fleeing ISIS had come to Turkey; the West and the UN, he said, were only bystanders to this situation and Assad's cruelty, merely talking, not acting. Erdoğan's long-debated statement about Kobani was in this speech as well. He stated that he had warned Western leaders about ISIS:

> *"You cannot end this terror by just bombarding from air. Regarding this, unless the cooperation with those who perform this task on the ground is established, it does not end with air operations. Here it is, months have passed, and there is no result. At the moment, Ayn al-Arab, also known as Kobani, you see, is also about to fall"* (Erdoğan 2014a).

Yet, in the context of aid, he refers to the ethnicities in the region to reflect the government's attitude towards them:

> *"Apart from our lands, the aid we sent to Syria and Iraq exceeded half a billion dollars. In Iraq and Syria, we reach our Arab fellows, Turcoman fellows, Kurdish fellows, the Yazidis and the Assyrians; without any discrimination of ethnicity, religion, or sect, we succor everybody. There is no discrimination in our religion. Hayrun-nâs, men yenfeun-nâs (the best people are those who are most beneficial to people)[5]; the criterion is this"* (Erdoğan 2014a).

October 12 in Gümüşhane, and again on October 12 in Bayburt) apart from the selected one; yet, their contents were quite similar.

[5] Erdoğan said this sentence in Arabic.

It is also interesting that the first three peoples are referred to as '*fellows*', while the others are merely '*Yazidis*' and '*Assyrians*'. Later on, he led up to the pro-Kurdish party's attitude towards the Kobani crisis:

> *"We are closely following the developments next to our borders. We carefully and anxiously follow the attacks against the towns and cities where our Kurdish fellows live, including Ayn al-Arab, also known as Kobani. My dear fellows! At the moment, we are unfortunately facing that; those who talk about Kobani on the one hand object to the resolution[6]; on the other hand, they struggle to make Kobani a domestic political issue of Turkey and use the reconciliation process as blackmail. I would like to say it from Islahiye. Turkey is against the terrorist organization PKK, as well as the terrorist organization ISIS. We want peace in this region"* (Erdoğan 2014a).

To begin with, it should be noted that the speech was being broadcasted by TRT, Turkey's public TV channel. In terms of social language, Erdoğan's speech reflects both his political stance and his official position as head of state and actually compounds them; he justifies the policy of Turkey by a Hadith which emphasizes the importance of being useful to people. At the same time, he bridges his place with the audience by being a member of an Islamic fellowship. The Kurds are in this fellowship too; that is why '*we*' are anxious; nonetheless, Kobani should not be viewed as being a part of the domestic politics of Turkey nor a condition in the reconciliation process as a part of these politics. Moreover, the president uses the Arabic name of the town first, and then the Kurdish one, which can be interpreted as an objection of the attributed Kurdishness of the town and historical existence of its other inhabitants.

In the evening of the same day, on October 7, Demirtaş was a guest of a live broadcast on IMC TV, a pro-Kurdish and/or opposition affiliated TV channel. The programme was live from Suruç, which is a Kurdish-populated town next to Kobane on the Turkish side of the border. The location of the speech is remarkable since this town is a transition point to tens of thousands of people from Kobani to Turkey. Here, talking next to the correspondent of the channel in front of an audience, Demirtaş interpreted the events and their relations to Turkey:

> *"Here, the Turcomans, Kurds, Shiites, Alawites, Sunnis, Yazidis, and Assyrians, hand in hand, should stop this barbarism all together. These lands are not anyone's father's oil well, but the common homeland and property of these peoples. These people resist against both these imperialist politics, and the ISIS barbarism which they temporarily use. If this resistance should be claimed and understood in this way, the reconciliation process will be rescued and passed through the negotiation process which Mr. Öcalan underlines and emphasizes with precision, and the borders of Turkey will be free from being threatened; we will get rid of this ISIS barbarism all together. And (the land) beyond these borders transforms to a safe zone, while a people, who are not enemies but fellows to us, are building their own democracy"* (Demirtaş 2014a).

[6] The parliamentary allowance to send troops to Syria and Iraq.

Demirtaş evidently uses a language which is embellished with well-known leftist themes and motifs such as the anti-imperialist struggle of the peoples although the US-led coalition is the greatest supporter of the PYD, launching forceful air strikes against ISIS, and place the Kurds in such a fellowship among the peoples in the region. However, just '*a people*' is establishing its democracy beyond the border. Furthermore, that people are in an emergency situation and Turkey has to question its position according to that. The reconciliation process also depends on how the state deals with the issue. But why does Turkey have a responsibility to help the PYD in Kobani?

> *"So now, for the sake of Allah, the Republic of Turkey says 'I am the state of the Kurds, too'; 'I am the state of my Kurdish citizens', it says. So, I am asking about it. Just yesterday, there was a military exercise in Polatlı. The tanks, aircraft, missiles of Turkey were tested. Now, such big weapons of Turkey are exhibited at that place, introduced to the world; here, the fellows of this country's 15–20 million Kurds are in need of a single cartridge, and Turkey does not let it, permit it. So then where is our state? Let us assume that it was not Kobani but Azerbaijan; and a county in Azerbaijan was besieged by ISIS and the Turkish people gathered at the border, and said 'ISIS are slaughtering our fellows; we want to help them'. Would the government disperse the Turks there with tear gas and batons? This question has to be sincerely answered"* (Demirtaş 2014a).

Demirtaş's discourse is in a conversation with a long discussion about whether ethnic or civic nationalism is dominant in the foundation of Turkey; in reference to its relations with Azerbaijan, together they follow the '*one nation, two states*' motto, which implies a Turkic fellowship. Demirtaş draws on these relations, creates a scenario, justifies the concern of the pro-Kurdish party for the ethnic kin people in Kobani, and reminds the state of its responsibility through some imaginary events. Turkey must do something, otherwise it cannot be considered as the state of the Kurds. The discourse aims to destabilize the legitimacy of the state in the eyes of Kurds through an alleged discrimination made by the state based on ethnicity. According to Demirtaş, hosting more than 200,000 Kurds fleeing ISIS cannot epitomize the state's attitude towards the Kurdish people, but its attitude against the PYD apparently can.

After the events subsided to some extent, it appeared that there had been many casualties and injuries caused by the events, and the HDP was severely criticized in public. Thus, on October 9, the party held a press conference in Diyarbakır, considered the biggest Kurdish populated city in Turkey. Demirtaş began his speech by wishing '*mercy from Allah upon the citizens who lost their lives*' and wishing health to the injured (Radikal 2014)[7]. After this, he allocated most of the speech to exculpate the call and stance of the HDP in the face of accusations and asserted that the government stayed indifferent to the ISIS massacres in Iraq and Syria; moreover, he said the government sent trucks full of weapons to the Free Syrian Army that might be in danger of being seized by radicals. He again questioned the state's position towards the Kurds, this time with references to the words of the President Erdoğan when he was the prime minister and also the incumbent Prime Minister Davutoğlu:

[7] The beginning part of his speech at the press conference was missing from the video record; therefore, that part was taken from the online page of the newspaper *Radikal*.

> *"He (President Erdoğan) said, 'We cannot assume what is happening in Syria as events which do not concern us'. The current prime minister repeatedly said when he was the minister of foreign affairs, 'The events in Syria are not ones to which we will remain indifferent; those are our internal issues'. But now, when the matter is Kobani, it is said, 'Why do you make the issue in another country our internal issue?'"* (Demirtaş 2014b).

After touching on the subject of ISIS torturing people in Iraq and Syria, he brought the issue to their meeting with Davutoğlu:

> *"We had a meeting with the Prime Minister. We struggled to raise hope after the meeting. We struggled to strengthen the ground of dialogue and reconciliation, and tried to expound the processes to the Prime Minister as much as we could. We tried to express the offence the people perceive and rage they have. We requested and stated that the situation is very sensitive and critical, and directly said this to the Prime Minister: 'Is it due to the lack of a state of theirs that the Kurds are so unattended?', and then Mr. Davutoğlu said, 'No, the Kurds have a state; we are that'. And we requested, 'Then show in practice that you are the state of the Kurds', and 'In the face of these many attempts of slaughter, just condemning them and saying, "We allowed one hundred eighty thousand people in, what shall we do more!" is offensive', we said"* (Demirtaş 2014b).

As can be seen, Demirtaş constantly directs attention to the same question: Is Turkey also the state of the Kurdish people or not? Later in the discussion, the leader of the pro-Kurdish party went through the events and stated that their call was peaceful, and some provocateurs distorted the protests; yet, they struggled to canalize this honourable standing of people properly. In addition, according to him, the government as well as President Erdoğan provoked the events. The relationship between the state and Kurds is again central:

> *"What increased the violence is not the HDP's call. What increased the violence is not the demonstrations of people. To find the ones who provoked it is the duty of the government. We are not those who are the state. At the time the demonstrations began, Mr. Erdoğan, who holds the greatest, most responsible position of this country, caused people's rage to increase exponentially by coming to a place close to the border and saying 'Kobani is about to fall'. What we had expected from the President of the country was not to herald that Kobani was about to fall, but to give the message that Kobani would not fall, and he is (standing) with Kobani. Our expectation was that; it was what people wanted to hear"* (Demirtaş 2014b).

He avoids uttering the names of Hüda-Par or Hezbollah and mentions the violent conflict only implicitly in his speech:

> *"During all these demonstrations, there were serious clashes. Related especially to this issue, we are making a call to all the political parties, the supporters and administrators of the parties to be sensitive and careful"* (Demirtaş 2014b).

Although he added that there were endeavours at the level of NGOs in the region in order to appease the increased tension between the groups who support the HDP and Hüda-Par, and thanked the contributors for their efforts, the language Demirtaş used was interesting. He implied a warning particularly for the supporters of Hüda-Par without mentioning the party's name. Ignoring this movement can also be viewed as a deliberate way for the HDP to preserve its perceived role as sole representative of the Kurds.

Demirtaş ends his speech by indicating the tie between Kurds in Turkey and the PYD forces in Kobani:

> *"We say, 'May Allah help our people's children who resist with great sacrifices'; we are with them; we stand behind them"* (Demirtaş 2014b).

The repeating concept of resistance is very important as a shared aspect of identity. As Gourlay (2017) argues, the repressive state measures imposed on the Kurds causes them to develop a popular resistance to what they perceive as the state hegemony. This resistance becomes a core feature of Kurdish identity by enabling Kurds to overcome their internal differences and to stress their differences from the Turkish majority. In the case of Kobani, the resistance they exhibit is the means by which they are attached firmly to this identity.

On October 11, President Erdoğan was evaluating the events and role of the HDP in his speech to an audience in his home town, Rize, by expanding on what he had said in Trabzon on the previous day. According to him, no country but Turkey cared about Kobani, and Turkey did everything to help the people of Kobani. He asked how a political leader could call people to the streets and then not take responsibility for the results of that call:

> *"As well as these terrorists on the street, the cowards who pushed them into the streets and are disguised as politicians hiding behind them, will be asked to account for these incitations. I want you to know that. On one hand, you say 'Get out on the street!' On the other hand, you say, 'We said freedom, peace; we told them to use their democratic rights; we did not tell them to resort to violence'. What kind of political responsibility is this? Is that possible?"* (Erdoğan, 2014b).

Even though he does not mention any names, it is clear that he addresses the HDP leadership and Demirtaş. He accuses them of provoking the masses, and he considers them responsible for the events; so he declares that they will be called to account (although it is not clear if he means legally or politically). Nevertheless, there was another point he emphasised by directly addressing the Kurdish people from eastern and south-eastern Anatolia:

> *"You must know this. If investors are not coming to the region today, it is because of the people who are talking on your behalf. What will happen? Someone will invest in south-eastern Anatolia and wait for his factory to be burnt down? You will burn down state banks and cash machines; and then you will shamelessly ask, 'Why is there no bank here?' You are burning down schools, you are burning down hospitals, you are burning down nursing homes, you are burning down dormitories in which children stay. What kind of politician are you? What kind of human are you? They say Kobani. What does Kobani have to do with one? What does Kobani have to do with Van? What does Kobani have to do with Erciş? What does Kobani have to do with Hakkari and Muş? What does Kobani have to do with İstanbul and Ankara? What does Kobani have to do with Diyarbakır. The purpose is something else. What does Kobani have to do with Patnos of Ağrı? They burnt down the town hall in Patnos. What bothered you about the town hall? You are burning down the buses you use. You are burning the vehicles of my Kurdish fellows. O my Kurdish fellows! Will not you still give these men a lesson? But I am calling out; whether you do it or not, we, as the state, will not hand this homeland to these terrorists. I want you to know this"* (Erdoğan 2014b).

At this time, the president was stressing the socio-economic dimension of the issue, the aspects which were affecting the life standards of Kurdish people, and then making a counter call to the Kurds to take action against the demonstrations and their actors, although Erdoğan does not describe how to do that. In addition, he was not paying regard to any distinction between the politicians of the pro-Kurdish party and terrorists, and this strategy was indicated by some scholars as well (Gunes and Lowe 2015; Yavuz and Özcan 2015). Later, he drew attention to the ethnic origins of the people who lost their lives during the events:

> *"Our 33 fellows have died, right? Almost all of them are Kurdish. You may not share the same views. But you killed. The ones who killed are Kurdish; the ones who got killed are Kurdish. Is there any rationale for it? Is there any explanation for it?"* (Erdoğan 2014b).

Erdoğan targets two specific points. First, he undermines the legitimacy of the pro-Kurdish party and questions their claim of really caring about the people for whom they struggle. Second, he attempts to demonstrate that the ideology of the PKK and HDP is more important to them than Kurdishness, and they are oppressive organizations which do not tolerate thoughts and views other than their own.

On October 14, at the weekly meeting of his party at the Great National Assembly of Turkey, Demirtaş summarized what had happened and stated that the pressure they had put and exhibited through the demonstrations had prompted the international community and the coalition to intensify the air strikes, and that had helped to relieve the PYD in Kobani. Yet his phrases were sharper this time, and he directly accused the government of helping ISIS and claimed that it was directly responsible for the rage of people, and consequently,

the events. Demirtaş repeated the points mentioned in the previous speech; however, he addressed the overall policies of the state in the long term. According to him, the state had used all the ways to oppress the Kurds. As a result, at the moment, they were fearless:

> *"What do you have more to apply? We would like to understand what you are threatening us with. Who will you make pay the price and how? How will these people, we, pay a heavier price? Death can be the last way. Each of our lives, by the will of Allah, can be sacrificed even a thousand times for the sake of our people; you should know it is so"* (Demirtaş 2014c).

This narrative of sacrifice is the point which Demirtaş uses to attach the Kobani events to the broader narrative framework of Kurdish identity, the sacrifices during the resistance against repressive state measures. Nevertheless, it is hard to ascertain where the casualties stand in this narrative; victims of the clashes in the events, such as 16 year-old Yasin Börü.[8]

As an addition to the preceding interpretations, it is possible to say that nationalist components constitute the main axis in Demirtaş's speeches while leftist ones are limited to being oppressed to a large extent; however, those components successfully build connections with some long-running debates about the nature of the Turkish state. On the other hand, Erdoğan, on the other hand, constructs his language as the representative of the state and reinforces it by making the collocutors realize that he is the legitimate side, so he can offer more than identity politics which leans on ethnicity. Yet, it is still troublesome to argue that Erdoğan would mark the second to option without hesitation in the long debated '*identity or interest*' question when it comes to collective identities (Poletta and Jasper 2001); since the well-known Islamic fellowship discourse which he makes use of as well, draws on another identity, too.

Rethinking Kurdish Question as a Field of Power Struggle

The Kobani events can be viewed as a severe confrontation between two adversaries, and the discourses allow us to observe the events with respect to the strategy of struggle, relationship of power, and also the reciprocal relations between them. In the struggle, the president gives the impression that the state is strong enough to overcome such attempts, while the pro-Kurdish party leader sounds certain that their supporters have the power to change the policies and course of events. However, the relationship of power in our context forms around a deeper struggle to undermine each other's legitimacy. As Chilton (2004: 203) demonstrates in his study on political discourse, the binary tendency is prevalent in political discourse for many purposes such as representations of party politics and formation of group identity. In our case, it is the main axis in the rival discourses about the events; the legality-illegality of the sides due to their relationships with the PKK, and the legitimacy-illegitimacy of the state (and thus, of the government) via the Gellnerian principle of nationalism, overlap between the nation and state.

[8] A Hüda-Par sympathizer who was killed by PKK sympathizers while distributing food aid to impoverished families. He was tortured, shot, and stabbed before being thrown off the balcony of the building where he took shelter with his friends, so he would not to be seized by the pro-PKK mob.

Yet, the relationship between the events and relevant discourse has further implications. Fine (1995) draws attention to a function of social movements, constituting a narrative through shared experiences, and shows that such a narrative structure promotes identification among the participants of those movements. Moreover, it also encourages audiences to identify with the situations and problems of others by creating social spaces. Considering that Kurdish nationalism is a counter-state nationalism within the dichotomy offered by Brubaker (2004), the aforementioned identification through shared experiences has been heavily influenced both by this standing against the state as in the case of the Kobani protests, and a narrative of oppression which always finds a receptive audience in the Kurdish population and is widely adopted as a part of Kurdish identity, according to findings of Gourlay's (2017) fieldwork-based study.

It is obvious that the defence of Kobani contributed to the nationalist narrative of Kurdish identity in terms of heroism and liberation, as well (Gunes and Lowe 2015). Through the events and their interpretations in Turkey, the pro-Kurdish party and its leader tried to add the Kurds in Turkey to that "heroic" narrative. However, applying violence to Kurds who do not share the same ideology is a part which must be omitted in the narrative. Moreover, Demirtaş gave voice to the Kurdish people's disappointment with the state's stance despite the reconciliation process, and asserted that it caused a fracture.

However, the witnessed violence after the HDP's call while the reconciliation process was ongoing had the likelihood to create a counter-reaction. As a finding of their empirical study, Sarıgil and Karakoç (2017: 210–211) point out that the state's efforts to enhance the Kurdish people's rights are not necessarily improving inter-ethnic relations, and there is still strong Turkish intolerance towards the Kurds and their rights. This was possibly another dimension of the situation Erdoğan had to take into consideration. Thus, on one hand, he brought forward that the state endeavoured as much as it could to help the Kurds; on the other hand, he made it explicit that the main reason to help them was Islamic fellowship, and Kobani was not a special matter for Turkey.

The Kobani events made it clear for Turkey that there are many factors and actors to deal with in the Kurdish question. Furthermore, they may have different approaches to the issues. For instance, Tezcür (2009) points out that the radicalization of the PKK when democratization increases in Turkey is in contrast to the conventional argument that a strengthening democracy is panacea to violent ethnic conflict, how electoral competition risks the Kurdish nationalist movement's control over its constituency and that the way they conceive their organizational survival are what to focus on (Tezcür 2009; Tezcür 2010). Hence, the calls, speeches, actions can be interpreted differently and distorted easily as in Erdoğan's sentence about the battle in Kobani or the HDP's call to hold the streets.

Another point to state, in this paper the events are analyzed discursively; but violence is not approached or explained merely as a means to hold or acquire power, as Fearon and Laitin (2000: 854) aptly points out inconvenience of such an approach:

> *"In other words, if violence and hardened ethnic boundaries serve elite but not popular interests, then what explains popular ethnic antipathies? Suppose that the leader of one group provokes a violent incident with members of another group. Why or under what conditions should this incident ''construct'' the group in a more antagonistic manner, increasing support for the leader and disposing the group toward yet more violence?"*

It should be reckoned that there is a reciprocal relationship between the discourses which this paper focuses on and the historical, cultural, social and political factors of the ethnic conflict in Turkey; thus, how the sides read, and in this way, reconstruct the Kobani events is also determined by their mindsets regarding the Kurdish question.

Concluding Remarks

It is possible to summarize the conclusions of this paper in two points. As for the first, the analysis points out that the actors build their discourses related to the events and the Kurdish question in general on quite different bases. The AK Party constructs its discourse through a Muslim fellowship with the Kurdish people and strengthens it with promises of economic and social progress. The party disregards the different ethnic identity dimensions of the question to a large extent and gives weight to the common religious identity in accordance with its conservative ideology. In response to this, the HDP constructs itself as the representative of the Kurds and their national identity. In addition, the party considers the Kurdish identity as a whole with its transnational ramifications. However, it accommodates this consideration with its alleged anti-national stance by depicting the Kurds as the oppressed in conformity with its leftist political position. Still, the ethnic emphasis on the Kurdish identity in the party's discourse engenders a contradiction with its claim to represent all people in Turkey regardless of their ethnic origins.

As for the second point, demonstrated by the events, the risk of violent events due to the confrontations of rival sides is embedded in the relations of power in the Kurdish question, and the analysis shows that the contesting political discourses are far from helpful to a peaceful reconciliation process. The existence and activities of a grassroots movement which challenges the pro-Kurdish party's influence on the population in the region renders such a goal even more difficult. Yet, if we focus on the discourses of the two big actors, it is clear that they struggle to undermine the legitimacy of one another in the eyes of the Kurdish people through a mutually antagonistic attitude. The HDP portrays the AK Party as the oppressor of the Kurdish identity by equating it with the Turkish nation-state and its long-running assimilationist policies, and also attempts to isolate it from the Kurds by showing it as the representative of Turkish identity. On the other hand, the AK Party tries to undermine its rival's legitimacy by equating it with terrorism, and blames it for the backwardness of the Kurdish-populated region.

The findings of the discourse analysis conducted in this paper can be read together with the findings of two other studies. In one of them, Uluğ and Cohrs (2017) examine the understandings of the political elites in parliament and, as one of their findings, reveal that the pro-Kurdish party and the AK Party agree with one another on the view that the Kurdish question stems from Turkey's official nation-state ideology based on Turkishness, and it must be handled as a problem of democracy. However, while the AK Party views the "uniting of Turks and Kurds again under the umbrella of Islam" as a solution to the question together with increased job opportunities and economic development, the pro-Kurdish party members consider it as an identity problem and reject the views which draw the Kurdish question to the economic and social ground by taking it as "Kurds' having some problems" (p. 18). In the other one, Aktürk (2018) asserts that Islamic conceptualization of the national identity as adopted by the AK Party constitutes both the main motivation for and the main limitation to the reformist initiatives of this party. As a consequence, it can be

set forth that although the HDP and the AK Party could reach a point in the handling of the Kurdish question by the help of their shared stance against the Kemalist nationalist ideology, as demonstrated in this paper, their power struggle over the Kurdish question aim to discredit one another in the steps going beyond this point.

In my view, the task attributed to democracy by Mouffe (2005), a transition from antagonism to agonism, may offer an insight into the confrontation addressed here. Such a transition is only possible by the sides' recognizing one another as adversaries; rather than enemies. Instead of a quest for a consensus which aims to wipe out the differences, the consent for sharing a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place may be put as a more achievable purpose for the democratic ground of the Kurdish question in Turkey as well. Also, considering its power within the interpretation, conceptualization and construction of reality, the discourse may be where to start for the actors to transform antagonism to agonism in this question.

As the final point, this paper analyses the contesting discourses on the Kurdish question through a case which is limited to a short period; but it consciously stays out of the further effects of the Kobani events and those discourses on this question in the following years due to its designated time limitation. Therefore, to what extent the events have an influence both in the discourse and in the policies of the HDP and the following governments, in which directions those experienced protests and clashes have effects on the Kurdish identity in the following years can be suggested for future research on this issue in order to complement the analysis given in this paper and to contribute to a better understanding of the question.

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