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The Political Psychology of Kurds in Turkey

Critical Perspectives on Identity, Narratives, and Resistance

Edited by
Ercan Şen
Elif Sandal Önal
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Palgrave Studies in Political Psychology

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The story of this edited volume starts with waiting. When we first began to delve deeper into the research conducted in Turkey on Kurdishness, we were all in different states of uncertainty and waiting. Acar had left her position at Özyeğin University and was waiting to hear if she would leave the country for a post in Scotland. She emptied her home and entire life, and then was suspended in a position of waiting. Sandal Önal was also waiting. She had been dismissed from her position by decree law and was hoping to start a new life in Germany. Her husband and son left ahead of her, and she was waiting for the right time to make the journey herself. Şen was also dismissed by decree law. He was a PhD student who was suddenly faced with having to decide if this new Turkish academia would accept him, and whether he needed to consider his life going in a different direction. Uysal was a PhD student, only to find his university had been shut down by the government, and he was uncertain what this meant for him and his future. We dedicate this edited volume to everyone affected by the political oppression and uncertainty in Turkey, who are still waiting for justice, peace, and democracy.

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Introduction

*Ercan Şen, Elif Sandal-Önal, Mete Sefa Uysal,
and Yasemin Gülsüm Acar*

The photograph you see on the cover of this book is of what was Hasankeyf, a city with a predominantly Kurdish population in southeastern Turkey. We say “was,” because this ancient Kurdish city with a history of 12,000 years, which harbored the birth of Eastern and Western civilizations, is now underwater. The destruction of Hasankeyf was not due to a disaster or natural event, but due to the construction of the Ilisu Dam,

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one of many barrage projects in the region. There were many efforts, starting with the initiatives of environmental activists, to prevent the project, but to no avail. In addition to environmental activists, the initiatives of famous writers such as Orhan Pamuk and Yaşar Kemal and famous artists such as Tarkan and Sezen Aksu could not stop the Turkish State's persistence that concluded with flooding Hasankeyf.

Attending the opening of the barrage project at Hasankeyf on May 19, 2020, President Erdoğan emphasized that a wind of peace, fraternity, and prosperity would blow from the Ilisu Dam (Gazete Duvar, 2020). Similarly, many bureaucrats stated that the project would contribute 412 million dollars to the country's economy due to the amount of energy it would produce, and provide job opportunities for many people (Euronews, 2020). Although the Turkish State presented the project as a powerful, renewable energy source and employment opportunity, the project was criticized for its devastating effects on the Kurdish resident population in the region (Zhang, 2021). In addition to the destruction of Hasankeyf, its population was forcibly migrated to the newly established city center, evoking the memories of Kurds who were forcibly displaced from their villages in the 1990s (Dissard, 2021). People removed from their traditional houses were forced to choose; stay in Hasankeyf but live in houses sold by the state for high prices, or leave. Furthermore, it was not only the villagers but also some of the historical buildings that were moved to the new settlements (Euronews, 2020). Despite everything, the project was carried out by the government, most of the fertile lands in the Mesopotamian Basin were destroyed, the ecosystem in the region changed, and the Kurdish locals who live in this area faced different and destructive forms of state violence once again.

The Kurdish issue, which is at the forefront of Turkey's deep-rooted problems, continues to shape the colonialist governmental policies of Turkey, as seen in the example of Hasankeyf. Although these policies are addressed in different ways on varying levels by parties with different political backgrounds, they are far from the solution to this issue, as they share or reproduce official state narratives. This predominant approach and rhetoric in politics are also reflected in academic knowledge (for exceptions see Beşikçi, 1968, 1977) and emerge as an obstacle to academic production that is supposed to produce valid and critical pathways to addressing the Kurdish issue. This limited production in the field of social sciences is also reflected in the discipline of psychology, and it is seen that the first productions on the centenary Kurdish issue emerged after the 2000s (Şen et al., 2021).

RATIONALE

The inspiration for this edited volume comes from research, reviews, and meta-analyses conducted by the editors on political psychological research into Kurdishness in Turkey. We all bring our unique perspectives as researchers to this work. Şen, who is a native Kurdish speaker and spent his childhood in Turkish Kurdistan, was introduced to different aspects of state violence at an early age. His childhood experiences in Kurdistan, as well as his experiences of discrimination in the major cities of Ankara and İstanbul, where he studied and worked as an academic, spurred his interest in studying different aspects of the Kurdish issue academically. Sandal-Önal has her roots in Dersim, but never lived in Kurdistan, nor speaks Kurdish/Zazaki. Apart from her research interests and being an Academic for Peace, her relationship to Kurdishness is linked to the stories her grandparents told her about the Dersim Massacre. Uysal is a Turkish researcher who has never been to Kurdistan and does not speak Kurdish. His first experiences of Kurdishness came when he politicized in his university years. His understanding, position, and identity related to Kurdishness are based on his relationship with close Kurdish friends and his wife, as well as his research into the Turkish-Kurdish conflict and Kurdish resistance. Acar is Turkish-American and only lived in Turkey as an adult. She studied the Kurdish language as a means to better connect with her Kurdish friends, as well as to support her field research into the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. Her experience of Kurdishness is primarily through close friends and research into the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, as well as her later status as an Academic for Peace. Kurdishness as a subject has often functioned as an applied context for many researchers seeking to replicate social psychological theories in Kurdish and Turkish contexts. This approach, however, misses the crucial questions that exist around studying Kurdishness in Turkey. For one, Kurdishness as an identity has been hotly contested and it is only in recent years that a political identity of “Kurdish” exists. At the same time, this identity is often a trigger word for political issues, such that even defining oneself as Kurdish can be a political act. At the same time, research on Kurdishness does not often enough recognize the dynamic social and political context of Turkey, and the historical and contemporary dynamics of the ongoing Turkish-Kurdish conflict when discussing its outcomes, losing out on important elements of data as well as reasons for the outcomes that are found.

We believe that research into Kurdishness touches on many of the important global issues within contemporary social and political psychology—questions about the rigors of methodology, the importance of reflexivity, issues of replicability, and the role of decolonization in research on actors in intractable conflicts. This volume will provide an in-depth account of historical and contemporary research on Kurdishness in Turkey, including research on social identity, intergroup contact, conflict and conflict resolution, as well as collective action and resistance. It will also address methodological issues including fieldwork in conflict zones, reflexivity in research, and intersectionality. This volume also provides lessons from related disciplines such as Kurdish studies and sociology to provide political psychologists some insight into their own research practices from disciplines wherein questions of intersectionality and reflexivity have long been ongoing.

THE CHAPTERS

This volume is divided into three overarching sections, though many of the chapters may speak to themes in different sections. The first section, *Intergroup conflict in Turkey: Conflict narratives and conflict-related identities*, explores the way that the Turkish-Kurdish conflict is understood by the general public of Turkey as well as how Kurds have ingrained the conflict in their own identities. There are three chapters in this section. Uluğ starts the volume with a focus on the conflict frames that have been identified and endorsed about the Turkish-Kurdish conflict (chapter “[An Overview of the Turkish-Kurdish Conflict Narratives and Their Effects on Intergroup Relations](#)”). The content of these frames, their antecedents and their outcomes are all discussed. The section continues with the topic of victimhood and victim identity. Although most of the studies on the Kurdish community in Turkey focus on the antecedents and consequences of victimization of this community, little is known about what “victimhood identity” means for those who are victimized. Alici scrutinizes the concepts of victimhood and the meanings of victimhood identity for Kurds around the concepts of vulnerability, agency, resistance, and empowerment (chapter “[Understanding the Implications of Victimhood Identity in Turkey’s Kurdish Conflict](#)”). The last chapter of this section by Karakuş and colleagues deals with the dynamics in the formation of Kurdish identity as a politicized collective category. The authors introduce the concept of rights consciousness as the key explanatory factor that politicizes

Kurdish identity while they propose that this consciousness evolves from the intergenerational transmission of violations of rights.

The second section, *Collective action: Memory, inter-minority relations, and Kurdish resistance*, focuses on the many ways that resistance has taken place within the Kurdish movement. The first chapter by Küçük, et al. (chapter “[Oath to Death: An Analysis of Sait Kırmızıtoprak’s Contested Memory](#)”) presents a sociological account of Kurdish collective memory by narrating the life and death of a prominent Kurdish figure, Sait Kırmızıtoprak, or Doctor Şivan. The authors reflect on the oblivion of his memory and argue that Kurdish people do not have an official history and their memories are fading, resulting in the loss of their collective meaning making systems and the continuation of colonial violence. Then, Duman continues the section with a focus on the relationship between Kurdish (the largest internally displaced population in the world and Turkey) and Syrian (the largest refugee population in the world and in Turkey) communities in Turkey (chapter “[The Other of the Other: Syrian Refugees from the Perspective of Kurdish Minority in Turkey](#)”). The chapter examines the Kurdish community members’ perceptions of and attitudes toward Syrian refugees within the political psychological frameworks of social dominance orientation, social identity, and collective psychological ownership. Last, Kaya and Acar focus on a specific group, the Saturday Mothers, and how their nearly 30 years of resistance has been passed from one generation to the next (chapter “[From Collective Action to Collective Resistance: Working with the Saturday Mothers](#)”). They discuss how they met and engaged in research with the Saturday Mothers, and how growing up in a protest movement has affected the subsequent generations.

The third section, *Reflexivity and positionality in Kurdishness and Kurdish Conflict Research in Turkey*, focuses on the methodological and epistemological aspects of the issues discussed in previous sections. Türkmen starts the third section with the importance of positionality in social scientific research. In this chapter, based on her field research among Kurdish religious elites in Southeastern Anatolia, where she was an outsider, Türkmen discusses the challenges and advantages of the outsider position (chapter “[Reflexivity and Positionality in Qualitative Research: On Being an Outsider in the Field](#)”). In the last chapter, Bayad and Şen analyze the colonial legacy of Turkish psychology by using the interpretative repertoire method (chapter “[How Did ‘Turkish’ Psychology Become the Mainstream? A Discourse Analysis on the Trajectory of Its Colonial Legacy](#)”). By tracing influential figures and publications in psychology

dealing with the social problem of their eras, Bayad and Şen discuss the colonial traces of the history of psychology in Turkey.

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An Overview of the Turkish-Kurdish Conflict Narratives and Their Effects on Intergroup Relations

Özden Melis Uluğ

The Turkish-Kurdish conflict in Turkey is an intractable conflict that has been ongoing for decades. After the foundation of the modern Republic of Turkey in 1923, non-Turkish identities, such as Kurdish identity and their cultural expressions, were denied and repressed by the Turkish state under the state ideology, Kemalism (Kirişçi & Winrow, 1997). This state ideology has been argued to be one of the reasons for the conflict in the country.

To challenge the repression on Kurds, the armed wing of the Kurdish national movement, the PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan–Kurdistan Workers' Party) launched its first major attacks in 1984. Since 1984, there have been many periods of escalation and de-escalation. The most recent attempt to build peace in the country also failed in 2015 (Özpek, 2017).

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