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Turkey-PKK Conflict and its Impact over Ankara's Relations with  
Kurdish Regions in Iraq and Syria

Master of Eurasian and Caucasus Studies

The Master's Thesis has been Written for Receiving Academic Title of Master in  
Social Sciences

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Tbilisi 2018

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the Turkey-PKK conflict and its impact on the Turkish administration's relations with the Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria in the light of Morgenthau's political realism theoretical perspective. The study argues that the scope of influence PKK has over these two regions determines the nature of policy the Turkish Government adopts in regard to the Kurdish entities in Iraq and Syria. The paper demonstrates that the PKK has more means of control over the Kurdish region in Syria and less control over the Kurds in Northern Iraq. For that reason PKK and the Kurds in Syria pose more security threat to Turkey than those in Northern Iraq. Therefore, it is in the national interest of the Turkey to have a more positive stance towards the Northern Iraq and oppose de-facto region in Syria.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AKP	Justice and Development Party
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
PYD	Democratic Union Party
YPG	People's Protection Units
TIP	Turkish Workers Party
TKDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party of Turkey
DDKO	Revolutionary Eastern Cultural Hearths
ADYOD	Ankara Democratic Higher Education Association
DDKD	Revolutionary Democratic Culture Association
ARGK	Peoples Liberation Army of Kurdistan
KADEK	Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress
NGO	Non-Governmental organizations
DTK	Democratic Society Congress
TAK	Kurdistan Freedom Falcons
BDP	Peace and Democracy Party
KCK	Kurdistan Communities Union

SNC Syrian National Congress

FSA Free Syrian Army

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## 1. Introduction

This thesis will argue that Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) as a threat to national security and interests of Turkey shapes Ankara's policies towards Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria rather than Turkey's domestic Kurdish question that has at large been resolved through Justice and Development Party's (AKP) neo-Ottomanism approach that places greater emphasis on religious belonging than ethnicity and, accordingly, gives more political and cultural rights to the previously completely denied Kurds. As a theoretical framework classical realism, as espoused by Morgenthau will be used. This chapter introduces the various background aspects related to the current research problem.

The Kurds are fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East. However, unlike the Arabs, Persians and Turks, Kurds do not have the state of their own. After the demise of the Ottoman Empire, the Kurds found themselves scattered throughout four different states – Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Kurdish national identity was formed in the context of creation of new nation-states that were supposed to replace the Ottoman and Persian empires. In Turkey, the Kurds' intention to oppose the official nationalistic policies by putting stress on their ethnical and cultural distinctiveness, on the one hand, and suppressive approaches from the side of state apparatus, on the other hand, politicized the Kurdish identity (Yavuz M. , 2001). The Kurdish resistance in Turkey first manifested in the form of Kurdish revolts in 1930s and later the creation of Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) based on Marxist-Leninist ideas. Since the declaration of war against Turkey in 1984, the PKK has posed a threat to Turkey's national security and interests (Beriker, 1997). Due to the PKK's violent activities, Turkey's political and economic stability has been jeopardized for more than 30 years. Moreover, Ankara's relations with both the Kurdish regions and official authorities of Iraq and Syria have been heavily influenced by Turkey-PKK conflict.

The factors such as the adoption of a more flexible policy towards the Kurds since 2002 and the reforms carried out in the framework of EU accession process, brought positive changes

– the Kurds were granted more political and cultural rights, which, in turn, lead to the decrease of discontent among the Kurdish population (Bocheňska, 2012). The imprisonment of PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan in 1999 also played a positive role in resolving tensions among the Kurds. However, the conflict between the PKK and Turkey has remained unsettled up to now. Despite several attempts of peace negotiations, armed attacks have been renewed between the PKK and Ankara since 2015 (Cadar, 2016).

As the aforementioned developments suggest, Turkey's policy towards the Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria to a great extent depend on Ankara's stance towards PKK. Paradoxically, Turkey established close political and economic ties with the Kurdistan Regional Government where PKK is based until today, however, fiercely opposes establishment of a Kurdish *de-facto* region in Syria and claims that the Kurdish forces in Syria are affiliated with PKK (Nader, Hanaver Scotten 2016). As we will see below, Ankara's policies towards Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish regions are mainly formed according to the extent of influence PKK has over these two Kurdish regions. In other words, Ankara is more likely to confront the Kurdish territorial-administrative unit over which PKK has more means of control and cooperate with another where PKK impact is minimal. The nature of PKK and three – closely intertwined domestic, regional and global dimensions of Turkey-Kurdish relations makes Turkey's Kurdish question and its impact over Ankara's changeable stance towards Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria particularly interesting to investigate.

The secularist and pan-Kurdish nature of the PKK distinguishes it from other terroristic organizations operating in the Middle East. Unlike many other terroristic organizations, PKK has never based its ideology on Political Islam. On the opposite, despite the fact that majority of the Kurds in all four countries – Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria are Sunnis, the PKK has emerged as a heavily secularist organization that initially based its ideology on Marxism-Leninism and later due to such political changes as the defeat of Socialism and capture of Abdullah Ocalan focused on radical democracy and confederalism that will be later explained in detail. In addition, pan-Kurdish and secularist nature of the organization threatens to some extent the interests of tribal Kurds (Ozcan, 2006). Therefore, it is not a surprise that the PKK

has rather tense relations with tribal KRG. Accordingly, the aforementioned peculiarities place PKK in confrontation with such terroristic organizations as ISIS or Al-Qaeda and even to some degree with the Iraqi Kurdistan. On the other hand, due to the secularist nature, PKK has a good chance of gaining friends in the West. Otherwise stated, the ideological structure of the PKK attracts such great powers as the US and Europe, but distances it from such powerful regional actor as Turkey. For example, activities of PKK-related Kurdish groups in Syria serve to the national interests of the West, but contradict to Turkey's national interests, as establishment of a PKK-affiliated independent territorial-administrative unit might have a very negative impact on domestic affairs of Turkey (Gunes, 2016).

On domestic level, the PKK represents an existential threat to the republic of Turkey, since it aimed to separate predominantly Kurdish territories from Turkey. Turkey is the successor of the Ottoman Empire which has inherited Kurdish resistance, i.e. persistent fight of the Turkey's Kurds against Turkish administration. In that regard the creation of the PKK can be regarded as a culmination of the conflict between the Kurds and Turkish state. A bloody war between the PKK and Turkish administration was declared back in 1984 (Kocher, 2002). Despite Ankara's tireless efforts – military actions or peaceful negotiations, even after 34 years PKK has not been entirely neutralized and time to time even carries out terroristic attacks on Turkish soil. Although the party has crippled significantly and had to undergo important structural and ideological changes, since the imprisonment of PKK founder and primary ideologist Abdullah Ocalan, all the same, the PKK has not disappeared from the political scene and as the late developments in Syria have recently proved. Although PKK's demands shrank from establishing a socialist Kurdish state to giving cultural and political rights to the Kurds within the framework of a democratic republic of Turkey or confederation, the pan-Kurdish nature of the party and its relatively decreased but still considerable popularity among the Turkey's Kurds places PKK among top threats to the national interests and security of Turkey (Özcan, 2006). PKK's new agenda does not necessarily imply establishing a Kurdish state on the expense of territorial integrity of Turkey, however, PKK still has capacity to destabilize Turkey. In other words, durability of the PKK-Turkey conflict and PKK's ability to survive

and adapt to the new realities make the case of PKK-Ankara confrontation exceptionally interesting to investigate.

As mentioned above, the PKK-Turkey conflict has a regional dimension which is so closely intertwined with the global politics that sometimes it is difficult to distinguish demarcation line between the regional and global politics. On the one hand, the Kurdish quest for creation of state of their own or establish Kurdistan as an independent territorial unit might further destabilize and fragment already fragile and heavily divided Middle East. On the other hand, the Kurds have been reliable allies of the United States first in the fight with Saddam Hussein regime and later with ISIS. If Iraqi semi-independent Kurdistan or *de-facto* Syrian Kurdish region ever obtain independence, it would absolutely change the balance of power in the Middle East. It also has to be stated that the Kurdish forces have been most successful in expulsion of ISIS from occupied territories (Park, 2016; Lister, 2016). Therefore, losing the Kurdish support could be a bit problematic for the US-led coalition and even result in strengthening tremendously weakened ISIS. Thus the government of Turkey's adversarial approach towards PKK naturally affects its relationship with other powers in the fight against terrorism

Last but not least, as it has been already mentioned, the PKK-Turkey confrontation is linked to global politics as well. As it seems, Turkey-Kurdish relations will shape to a large degree not only the Middle Eastern developments, but will impact global politics since Ankara-Washington partnership is heavily influenced by Turkey's discontent with advancement of the Kurdish forces in Syria (Lowe, 2016) . In the light aforementioned events, it is important to explain why Turkey, which has close political and economic ties with KRG is even ready to jeopardize its partnership with its long ally United States in order to avoid establishment of Kurdish region in Syria. Under Obama administration, Turkey persistently insisted that the United States stopped backing of YPG in Syria (Gonul & Tol, 2016)Tensions between Ankara and Washington have not improved under Tump's administration either. As the President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan noted The Oil Branch Operation that has started in January 2018 in northern Syrian, namely, in Afrin is a national battle that implies protecting national interests

of Turkey. As the Turkish administration emphasized, Turkey does not have any problems with the Kurds in general and Ankara only opposes terroristic organization –YPG and PYD that Turkey (Shaheen, 2018). Indeed, Turkey-US relations have been significantly strained due to the US support of Kurdish militant forces in Syria which Turkey claims have close ties with the PKK. Developments in Syria, as it seems, will have an immense impact on the relations between Ankara and Washington.

### **1.1. Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The aim of the paper is to explain why Turkey adopts different policies towards Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria. The study seeks:

- a. Examine the factors that make PKK a threat to Turkey's national security.
- b. Examine how the policy of the Turkish administration towards PKK has changed under Justice and Development Party.
- c. Explaining why Ankara administration relations with KRG have improved significantly, but remain bitter with the Kurdish *de facto* region in Syria.

### **1.2. Research Question and Hypothesis**

The paper will attempt to answer the following question:

- Why did Turkey improve relations with KRG but oppose fiercely Kurdish *de facto* region in Syria?

Below is the hypothesis of the study which shed light on the research question.

*PKK has more means of control over Syrian de facto Kurdish region than semi-independent KRG, therefore, Turkey is inclined to have closer ties with KRG and oppose Syrian Kurdish region.*

The extent of the influence PKK has over the Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria is the independent variable. Although Ankara tries to resolve conflict with PKK via peaceful or violent means, all the same, PKK has been posing a direct threat to the national security and interests of Turkey since its establishment. Therefore, Turkey's primary objective in that regard is to eliminate the terroristic organization. Thus, the scope of impact PKK has over the Kurdish communities in Iraq and Syria shapes the Turkey's policy towards these two regions. Accordingly, changeable stance towards the Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria can be named as dependent variable which varies according to the extent of influence PKK has over these two regions.

In other words, the scale of PKK's impact over the Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria can be described as the independent variable. Correspondingly, Turkey's stance towards the Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria is dependent variable.

### **1.3. Research Design and Methodology**

This research uses the case study research design involving Turkey, Kurdish communities in Syria and Iraq, and PKK. This method is selected because of its comparative advantages to other methods of research, particularly statistical methods. Andrew Bennett identifies the advantages as including "the operationalization and measurement of qualitative variables (construct validity), the heuristic identification of new variables or hypotheses, the examination of potential causal mechanisms within particular cases or contexts, the historical explanation of cases, and the incorporation of complex relations like equifinality and path dependency into typological theories" (Bennett 2004, p. 34). The case study method is employed to explain how PKK influences the Turkey's relationship with the Kurds in Syria and Iraq. It helps explain the variation in the way Turkey relates to these communities.

One of the major methods used in this study is document analysis of a variety of documents including, per-reviewed articles; media articles; web-pages; television scripts; organizational reports, and survey data on the cases under consideration. As Bowen (2009, 29) states, “Documents of all types can help the researcher uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research problem.” Nevertheless, the researcher does not assume that every kind of document contains unmitigated truth. She is aware that documents were written to achieve certain objectives and may not directly answer the research question of this thesis. To avoid being misled by documentary evidence, the researcher will systematically analyze the evidence and attempt to identify the purpose of the documents and intended audience.

Document analysis has many advantages over other methods of collecting data. It provides background information which may help “researchers understand historical roots of specific issues and can indicate the conditions that impinge upon the phenomena currently under investigation” (Bowen 2009, 29-30). Compared with other methods, document analysis is cost effective and less time-consuming as it does not require data collection. The task of the researcher is simply to retrieve the data and analyze them. Moreover, documents are easily accessible, thanks to the advent of the Internet. Consequently, finding public documents is limited only by one’s imagination and diligence. The other qualities that make document analysis attractive are that documents are stable, unobtrusive and non-reactive (Yin 2014; Bowen 2009). These qualities suggest that documents are not affected by the research process. Nonetheless, documents are produced for other reasons other than research, which implies that they may not provide enough information to answer a research question. In addition, documents are sometimes not retrievable. Yin (2014) notes that access to documents may be deliberately blocked. Yet, as Bowen (2009, 31) says, “These are really potential flaws rather than major disadvantages. Given its efficiency and cost-effectiveness in particular, document analysis offers advantages that clearly outweigh the limitations.” The researcher searched and analyzed a variety of documents taking into account the purpose of each document as well as the context and intended audience.

The data was triangulated by structured interviews. Clifford Geertz (1973) posits that conversation provides insights into meaning. It has to be stated that the interviews might be biased

due to the respondent's official status, inner beliefs and considerations. Subjective judgement or job position might prevent interviewer from presenting an objective picture or revealing important details. On the other hand, interviews are an effective tool for generating primary data that might be essentially important for analyzing the topic under investigation. Interviews might be useful tool for comparing, evaluating, revising and analyzing the information obtained via document analysis method.

The interviews targeted scholars who are knowledgeable about the issues involved in this study. The researcher used her social networks to identify individuals who might be interested in participating in the study as interviewees. Interviews were conducted through face to face method and pen and paper interview techniques, email and skype. The procedure involved emailing introduction emails to potential participants and requesting them to participate in interviews. After obtaining their consent, the researcher sent out a set of interview questions in advance appended at the end of this thesis. One interview was conducted with the Ambassador of Turkey to Georgia, Fatma Ceren Yazgan. The other respondent professor at one of the universities of Turkey due to the sensitivity of the topic under investigation and safety reasons decided to stay anonymous.

#### **1.4. Importance of Study**

The research will supplement on Turkey-PKK conflict and its impact over Ankara's position on KRG and *de-facto* Kurdish region in Syria. Although there is a considerable amount of literature on why Turkey tries to get closer to KRG and fights mercilessly Kurdish region in Syria, there is the lack of a comprehensive substantiated argument what would provide a single convincing explanation of Turkey's different approaches towards two Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria.

In addition, the paper might help interested audience and policy makers to better understand Turkey-PKK relations that has regional implications and which heavily influences the political environment in the Middle East. If an independent Kurdistan ever emerges, Turkey's position will be crucial not only for the regional but also global stability. In the light of the aforementioned

events it is essentially important to understand the factors that motivate Turkey to adopt sharply different approaches towards Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria.

### **1.5. Limitations of Study**

It has to be emphasized that the research has its limitations. First, due to the geographical remoteness from the region under investigation, small financial resources and restricted time framework, the paper contains the limited number of interviews. Interviews conducted on spot would give a more detailed picture of the PKK-Turkey conflict and its regional implications. Second, the interviews were conducted with the Turkey-backing respondents. Therefore, the Kurdish position presented in the study is solely based on the data generated through analyzing different documents and interviews published in the journals or broadcasted by TV or other social media means.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.0. Introduction**

This thesis uses the theoretical framework of realism, especially Morgenthau's formulation. The paragraphs that follow explain and critique the tenets of the theory and show how the theory will be applied in this study. Although the theory has some weaknesses, the researcher acknowledges its importance in explaining the question that guides this study.

### **2.1. Main Concepts and Ideas of Classical Realism**

Broadly speaking, realism is an International Relations (IR) theory that seeks to analyze political events and give a comprehensive explanation why a concrete political situation leads to particular results. Otherwise stated, realism attempts to assess politics and behavior of incumbents objectively and provide universal principles that underlie realm of politics. Kauppi and Viotti (2012) state that the main idea of realism is to show political reality as it is and not as it should be. According to them, realism school of thought stands on the following main principles:

- a. Nation states are regarded as the main actors in politics.
- b. Although not absolutely rejected, non-state actors such as NGOs or terroristic groups are attached little attention in realism.
- c. States are perceived as unitary actors, i.e. a state has one voice that represents official position.
- d. Ideologies or internal structure of states matter, but not as much as political power and anarchy – absence of universal authority that would be imposed on all nation states.
- e. States are egoistic political actors that function solely on the base of self-help and their interests.
- f. States are rational actors who base their political decision on cost–benefit analysis, i.e. maximizing benefit and minimizing risks or costs.

- g. National and international security is far more important than social or economic grievances.
- h. Alliances and cooperation between states is possible, but less likely to produce tangible outcomes, i.e. prevent inter-state conflicts from happening (Kauppi & Viotti 2012, pp 39-40)

Morgenthau is regarded as the founder of classical realism. Hans Morgenthau constructed the six principle model of political realism that was supposed to endure time and stay relevant due to its generalized and universal theoretical essence. As the human nature stays intact, the author believed that the major principles of politics would not change over the time (Jervis, 1994). Morgenthau's (2000) theoretical discourse entails six main principles:

- a. Politics is governed by objective laws that are rooted in human nature that has not changed since the ancient times.
- b. Political interest should be defined in terms of power. Motives behind the political actions do not matter or do not necessarily produce wanted results.
- c. Interest defined in the terms of power does not represent fixed category and varies according to the political and cultural background and context.
- d. Political realism accepts the moral significance of political action. Moral and political necessities do not always coincide with one another and should be filtered through a given political situation, i.e. the time and space of a concrete political development should be taken into account.
- e. Moral principles of a particular state are distinct from universal moral categories.
- f. Political interest defined as power gives autonomy to the field of politics.

Thus, Morgenthau's realism is based on rationality and self-interest of states. National interest defined in terms of power plays a central role in his theorizing. Unlike, neoclassical realists, Morgenthau considers multiple goals of a state , moral and statemanship along with national interest and power as important factors for the analysis of politics. According to him, states act rationally. Hence, the foreign policy of a state under investigation should serve directly to its

national interests. Power thirst is another significant element in politics that forces incumbents and, accordingly, states to protect their interests by all – sometimes morally unacceptable means (Jervis 1994). According to Hans Morgenthau, “Self-preservation for the individual as well as for societies is not only a biological and psychological necessity, but in the absence of an over-riding moral obligation a moral duty as well” (Morgenthau 1950, p. 854).

Nonetheless, realist thinking has a long history. The main concepts on which realism was based in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were introduced centuries before in political-philosophical thinking. Perhaps the first inspirer of realism is Thucydides and his famous work –*History of the Peloponnesian War*. The author gave a thorough explanation of the factors that might lead to war. He claims that the conflict between Athens and Sparta was caused by Sparta’s intense fear due to the significant increase of Athenian power. In other words, states fiercely strive for self-preservation that is national interest led to an armed conflict (Chance, 2012).

Another distinguished author that contributed to the creation of realism school of thought is Niccolo Machiavelli who focused on the inherently conflicting human nature and presents national security of a city-state as a primary political goal. According to him, due to the imperfect human nature, conflicts and rivalry is unavoidable. Therefore, the prince – the ruler of a state must protect unity of a city-state even with the help of violent and forceful means. Accordingly, moral and politics are distinct notions. Use of cruel methods by the prince are justified by the need to maintain national security that, in turn, guarantees wellbeing of its subjects (Machiavelli, 1985).

Thomas Hobbes, one of the most influential political philosopher also shared a very pessimistic view on the human nature. According him, humans are inclined to confront one another. He hypothetically imagined the state of nature that is characterized by the absence of state authority – a reality when all are against all. Hobbes claimed that, the state of nature would lead to chaos and anarchy that would harm everyone because of the violent nature of humankind. Therefore, for him a ‘social contract’ that implies voluntarily giving particular political rights to a sovereign, i.e. Leviathan is imperative in order to avoid constant fear and violence and guarantee peaceful

co-existence of human beings. Thomas Hobbes, like Machiavelli, places national interests, unity and stability of a state above all, i.e. integrity and inviolability of state authority should be assured by all means. If a state authority fails to function properly, the whole society will sink into chaos (Hobbes, 1631).

In other words, the main concepts such as considering voracious and power-seeking nature of the humankind as the primary source of conflict, separation of moral from politics and above all, placing national interest of a state among most essential and vital objectives of politics had been familiar to the philosophical-political theorizing long before Hans J. Morgenthau, the founder of the classical realist conception elaborated political realism theoretical framework based on six major principles. Morgenthau, one of the most influential twentieth-century international relation theorists and founder of contemporary classical realism, like Machiavelli and Hobbs regarded flawed human nature as the major cause of conflict. He like both Machiavelli and Hobbs drew strict line between politics and moral and attached particular attention to national interest and security (Griffiths, 2007).

## **2.2. Forms of Realism and Other Schools of Thought**

It has to be emphasized that realism school of thought does not have a single and unified theoretical conception. On the contrary, realism is mainly divided into classical realism and structural realism. Structural realism, in turn, produces two closely linked but different directions – defensive and offensive realism. The primary factor that distinguishes classical from structural realism is the fact that classical realism seeks to explain politics on the base of imperfect human nature, while the latter puts emphasis on anarchical composition of the international political system (Brown, 2009). Accordingly, classical realists attach more importance to political-cultural background and freedom of action of statesmen who are involved in political processes, while structural realists consider the structure of international politics as the base of political processes (Kauppi & Viotti, 2012).

Kenneth Waltz is regarded as a founder of structural realism. However, in his early book *Man, the State and War* published in 1959, Waltz is close to the classical realist reasoning. He tries to explain international political order and cause of war with the help of the following three principles: First, human beings are imperfect creatures that are inclined to commit both bad and good deeds; the state structure, i.e. internal composition of a state matters in terms of fighting war. The so-called bad states are prone to fight wars than good states; third, absence of global governments makes war more likely to happen (Waltz, 2001). As it seems, due to his focus on the human nature and internal fabric of a state, Waltz in his early writings was closely linked to the classical realism thinking that seeks to explain politics on the base of human nature and gives importance to cultural and political context. However, later Waltz (2001) mainly attached his attention to the anarchical nature of international political system, i.e. absence of global government that makes nation-states primary political actors. According to him, states mainly focus on defending themselves from external aggression that is likely to occur due to the anarchical structure of the international political system. Accordingly, Waltz (2001) is the representative of defensive structural realism that sees defense rather than offence as the driving force of nation-states. According him the anarchical order of the international political system rather than other factors pushes states to seek for enough power to defend itself from possible aggression and maintain status quo (Waltz, 1979).

John Mearsheimer (2001) is widely regarded as founder of offensive model of realism. He views nation-states as the primary political actors, but presents the structure of global political system as the main factor that shapes the politics. The author argues that due to the extensive capabilities, great powers dictate rules to smaller and weaker states, i.e. great powers have greater influence on the international politics. Mearsheimer (2001) claims that great powers strive to gain power at the expense of one another. According to him, international politics can be explained on the base of anarchical international political structure - absence of a global government and not the imperfect human nature. According to the author, states are suspicious of each other and seek to obtain and widen offensive capabilities in order to stay on the safe side. Mearsheimer (2001) claims that offensive realism's conception that implies that great powers seek to maximize their

power well-explains how great powers acted in the past and will behave in the future. According to the author, offensive realism provides best model of survival for the states in an insecure world.

Unlike both classical and structural realists who mainly focus on the power, self-interest and security, liberal theorists do not consider nation-states as the starting point of political analysis. They see transnational or international organizations and cooperation between the states as an important factor for the thorough analysis of political processes. The liberals hold distinctively optimistic views about human nature and see democracy, cooperation between the states and the economical-political interdependence of the states on one another as the main factors of preventing conflicts between the states (Baylis , Smith , Owens 2017).

However, not all the liberal theorists are so optimistic about the human nature. For example, Walker (2008) argues that the revolutionary liberalism of the famous liberal author, Thomas Paine's is based on pure optimism, while another influential liberal philosopher Immanuel Kant focuses more on the gradual evolution of mankind and political order. Accordingly, their assumptions about human nature differ significantly. Paine believes that human beings are logical and good by nature. However, they are demoralized by non-democratic or tyrannical form of governance. Therefore, the situation can be promptly and effectively improved by establishing democracy. Kant, on the other hand, has a relatively pessimistic view on human nature. He accepts dark side of humanity. However, Kant is convinced that gradually human nature can be improved by political institutions that would encourage good and quell bad inclinations.

Another school of thought, constructivism, also contradicts realism theoretical thinking that bases its political analysis on the imperfect human nature, national interests or structure of global political system. Constructivism claims that international politics is historically and socially constructed rather than ineluctable outcome of human nature or global political structure (Kauppi & Viotti, 2012). According to the constructivists, identities that are at large excluded from the political analysis both by classical and structural realists shape and give meaning to the interests of states. Distinguished constructivists theorist Wendt (1992, p. 398) states, "Identities are bases

of interests. Actors do not have a “portfolio” of interests that they carry around independent of social context; instead they define in the process of defining situations.”

To sum, realism is one of the most influential IR theories on the base of which analysts are trying to explain important global political processes and events. Realism sees nation-states, power, security and national interests as core ideas that underlie political life. However, classical and structural theorists have sharply different views on the main factors that shape political life. Classical realists mainly focus on imperfect human nature, power and national interests, while structural realists consider global political system with anarchy as the main factor that determines actions of states. Other school of thoughts, such as liberalism and constructivism contradict realist thinking. By presenting economical-political interdependence, cooperation and democracy as the remedy of conflicts between nations, liberalism opposes both classical and structural realism and its harsh interpretation of political reality where cooperation and optimism over human nature holds a very little place. Constructivism, on the other hand, also rejects realist ideas by viewing social factors and identities as the core determinants of political events.

### **2.3. Turkey-PKK Conflict and its Regional Implications in light of Political Realism Framework**

As stated previously, this thesis aims to analyze the PKK-Turkey conflict and its impact over relations between Turkish administration and Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria in the light of Morgenthau’s classical realism. The PKK-Turkey conflict and its impact over Turkish administration’s two different foreign policy stances towards the Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria can be well explained with the help of Morgenthau’s theoretical conception. The aforementioned foreign policy choices are to a great extent shaped by the need of self-preservation and national interest. Turkey’s choice of opposing Syrian Kurdish *de-facto* region and establishing friendly ties with KRG are based on rational calculations aimed at destabilizing PKK that challenges stability, unity and territorial integrity of Turkey. From Mogernthou’s principles, perhaps two interests defined as ‘power that maximizes benefits and minimizies risks of foreign policy decisions and distinctiveness of morals and politics’ are essentially important to explaining the research

problem. As it has been already mentioned above, beginning from the ancient times until today the minimal goal of a state is to preserve its territorial integrity whereas its maximal objective is to further enhance its power. In other words, the notions of self-preservation and national interest are so closely interrelated that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish them from one another. As it seems, in Morgenthau's theoretical model, self-help and survival are identified with the national interest. Accordingly, PKK represents number one security threat to territorial unity of Turkey and survival as an important political actor. Thus, it is absolutely natural that Ankara's benevolence towards Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria is heavily dependant on the extent of influence PKK has on these two Kurdish regions. Turkish authority seeks to maximize its benefits and minimize its risks by supporting Iraqi Kurdistan administration that is in rivalry with PKK and confronting a newly-emerged *de facto* Kurdish region in Syria that is heavily dominated by the PKK. In other words, not the moral or ideological considerations but the rationality determines Ankara's policies towards Kurdish entities in Iraq and Syria. Turkey's internal Kurdish issue is closely linked to the PKK which despite the Turkish administration's tireless efforts still has strong influence over the Kurds of Turkey. Therefore, weakening PKK by establishing friendly relations with KRG and attacking newly formed *de-facto* Kurdish region in Syria that is heavily dominated by PKK is a rational choice, primary goal of which is to serve the best interest of Turkish state and guarantee its survival and safety.

It has to be also emphasized that although political realism's benefit maximizing and risk minimizing discourse well explains Ankara's motives determining two different foreign policy positions towards the Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria, Morgenthau's theoretical conception has also its limits. Political realism says nothing about such non-state terrorist political actors, as PKK. Therefore, PKK will be analyzed as a security threat to Turkey's national interest and political stability that has implications over foreign policy choices towards Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria. The Kurdish regions, on the other hand, will be treated as an ethnic group without official statehood that has to some extent legalized its existence as an independent entity first in Iraq and later in Syria. According to Hans Morgenthau "a nation is an abstraction from a number of individuals who have certain characteristics in common, and it is these characteristics that make

them members of the same nation” (Morgenthau, 2001, p. 97) Hence, the above mentioned definition of a nation can be freely used in the regard of the Kurds who represent the fourth largest etnical group in the Middle East that reside in four states – Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria but do not have the state of their own. In addition, the international support of the Kurds in Iraq and Syria also strengthens their legal status.

### **3. Literature Review**

#### **3.0. Introduction**

This chapter presents the literature review on the Kurdish identity and nationalism, Turkey-PKK conflict and its impact on regional and global politics. The chapter is divided into the following sections: literature connected with Kurdish identity, literature related to the domestic and global dimensions of Turkey-PKK conflict.

#### **3.1. The Kurdish Identity and Nationalism**

Several works suggest that present day conflicts in the Middle East are related to the colonial past and collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Lu and Thies (2013, 241) note, “The Middle Eastern states are characterized by fragmented societies with artificially imposed states.” Kumaraswamy (2006) argues that due to the British-French imperialistic aspirations and self-interest, different ethnic national identities were incorporated in one country or the same ethnic group was split up among the different states. A very good example of the last-mentioned development are perhaps the Kurds who reside in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. The Kurds have not given up on the dream of establishing a Kurdish state up to now.

Some literature emphasizes that Kurds are largest ethnic group in the Middle East without statehood. As Dahlman (2002) suggests a strong sense of belonging to a distinct ethnic group from the Turks, Arabs and Persians. Linguistically, they are linked to Iran, religiously they are close to Turkey. The Kurdish language belongs to West Iranian Indo-European language which has little to do with Turkish or Arabic. The Kurdish language consists of three sufficiently different dialects – Kurmanji, Zaza and Gurani. The majority of the Kurds are Sunnis. However, they follow legal code of Shafi School, while most Sunni Turks and Arabs exercise the Hanafi School of Islamic thought. In addition, among the Kurds there are the Shias, Alevis, Yazidis, Christians and the followers of Ahl-i Haqq sect.

Yavuz (2001) states that after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Kurds found themselves divided between four different states – Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, i.e. instead of living in Persian and Ottoman worlds, under the new circumstances the Kurds had to survive in Turkish, Arabic and Persian hostile environment. Fuller (1993)'s arguments are also in line with Yavuz's reasoning. He believes that the cosmopolitan nature of the Ottoman Empire and, most importantly, religious identity held different ethnic groups together. Accordingly, after the destruction of Ottoman multi-lingual and multi-cultural structure, ethnicity that had little value during the Ottoman period gained significance. International excitement for the self-determination gave the Kurds the hope of establishing a Kurdish state. According to the Treaty of Sevres in 1920, the Kurds were promised their own country. However, Kemal Ataturk replaced the aforementioned agreement with the Treaty of Lausanne which was giving control of the Kurdistan in Turkey to the new Turkish Republic.

According to Gunter (2013), in order to silence those who opposed official homogenization strategies, the policy of assimilation that implied suppression of minority nationalistic aspirations were applied, which in turn, caused discontents among Kurds who wished to preserve their cultural distinctiveness and lifestyle. The Kurds, who lived in the mountains and apart from their obvious cultural individuality enjoyed great deal of freedom from the central authority and followed tribal way of life, were fiercely antagonized by Turkish and Arabic policies that aimed to change existing lifestyle. In other words, the Kurdish nationalism was constructed in opposition to the Turkish, Arabic and Iranian state nationalisms.

The analysis of Gresh (2009) suggests that only once but for a very short time the Kurdish nationalism managed to reach its final goal - in 1946 the Kurdish republic of Mahabad was established in Iran. Although the republic functioned only 11 months, Mohabad made important achievements in cultural sphere – schools taught in Kurdish, textbooks were translated from Persian into Kurdish, daily newspapers, periodic publications were issued, etc.

According to O'Leary (2002), the only place where the Kurdish nationalism is officially institutionalized today is perhaps northern Iraq. However, the Iraqi Kurds still have a long way

to go to obtain independence. The path to autonomy has not been easy as the Kurds had to survive ethnic cleansing and genocide in the form of Al-Anfal operation when chemical and biological weapons were used against the Kurdish population, economic blockades, chemical assault in Halabja, displacement especially from such oil rich districts as Kirkuk, etc.

Albert (2013) notes that the above developments can be well explained by Saddam Hussein's intention to build great Arabic nationalism under Iraqi hegemony. Accordingly, the process of building Iraqi national identity placed the Kurds as well as Shias and other groups in conflict with the Baath ideology, which, in turn, resulted in brutal violence against outgroup representatives. However, by strengthening Iraqi national identity, the individuality of the Kurdish group became more evident. Baath party saw the Kurds as a dangerous threat to their regime, therefore, aggressive methods – mass killings and deportations were used against them (Salih 1995). Nevertheless, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 provided the Kurds with unique opportunity – by supporting anti-Saddam coalition, the Kurds gained the status of a US reliable ally (Galbariath 2006). Consequently, thanks to newly-established Iraqi federalist structure, KRG was granted autonomy. As Cadar (2016) emphasized, the factors such as the adoption of a more flexible policy towards the Kurds since 2002 and the reforms carried out in the framework of EU accession process, brought positive changes.

### **3.2. Domestic Dimension of Turkey-PKK Conflict**

Turkey-PKK conflict is widely discussed topic among scholars. Many scholars claim that even after many decades the conflict between the PKK and Ankara remains unresolved and has immense impact on Turkey's domestic and foreign policy. They suggest that after the Justice and Development Party (AKP) rise power the Turkish administration softened its policy towards the Kurds significantly. Gachechiladze (2003) presents PKK as one of the main actors of the Kurdish nationalism and focuses on the political and cultural reforms that were adopted by the Turkish government after the AKP's coming on the political scene. He also considers the pressure from the West as one of the factors that led to the reforms mentioned above. According to Murinson

(2006), the neo-Ottomanism that implies greater emphasis on religion rather than ethnicity was a response to an acute Kurdish question and PKK's armed struggle against the Turkish administration. Hintz (2016)'s opinion is that the Kurdish question has been resolved through AKP's inclusive policy. However, due to the intragovernmental divisions peace talks with the PKK have failed. Pusane (2014) also views AKP's new policy as a positive step forward in the Turkish-Kurdish relations and considers intragroup divisions in the Turkish government and PKK as the main impediment for the resolution of Ankara-PKK conflict.

In sum, all the aforementioned literature suggests that Turkey-PKK conflict has been unresolved up to present despite AKP's efforts of changing policy towards the PKK and trying to adopt a more inclusive Islam-oriented stance on internal Kurdish question.

### **3.3. Regional Dimension of Turkey-PKK Conflict**

Most literature demonstrates that Turkey's domestic Kurdish question has regional implications and that without a thorough examination of PKK links with Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan it will be impossible to understand Turkey's foreign policy decisions in the regard of Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria. As Cornell (2012) claims Ankara developed closer ties with the Northern Iraq in the framework of Davutoglu's doctrine of zero problems with neighbors that implies normalizing relations with the neighboring countries and playing greater role in the regional affairs. As Charountaki (2012) suggests Ankara's policy towards KRG intends to maximize Turkey's influence in the region and resolve Kurdish issue in such a way that will serve the immediate foreign policy interests of Turkey. Barkey (2005) emphasizes that Turkey improved relations with Northern Iraq in order to balance Iran's influence in the country, preserve territorial integrity of Iraq and obtain economic leverage over KRG.

As said above, some scholars think that the interconnection of Turkey's domestic Kurdish issue with the Northern Iraq forced Ankara to change its stance towards KRG. Efeğil (2008) believes that Turkey shifted from crisis focused to vision oriented foreign policy strategy of Turkey, forced Ankara to reconsider its priorities and acknowledge importance of KRG in resolving domestic

Kurdish issue. Khan (2015) suggests that Turkey's interest in establishing close ties with Iraqi Kurdistan can be explained by two factors – desire to balance PKK and KRG's rich energy resources. As Pusane (2016) presents four main factors why Turkey's changed its position towards KRG – the need to find new markets, rich energy resources, transformed foreign policy strategy and strengthening of PKK-affiliated groups in Syria. Nader, Hanauer, Allen, and Scotten (2016) go as far as suggesting that because internal Kurdish issues has to a large extent been resolved via AKP's new inclusive foreign policy strategy, Ankara would not even mind establishing an independent state of Northern Iraq. As these authors claim, independent KRG might help to counter advancement of PKK-linked Kurdish groups in Syria and also benefit Turkey from economic standpoint as without pressure from Bagdad it will be much easier for Ankara to negotiate with KRG over energy resources with with Erbil than Bagdad.

On the other hand, many scholars suggest that Turkey's extremely unfriendly and even hostile stance towards a Kurdish region in Syria is stipulated by the dominance of PKK-affiliated groups over the newly emerged Kurdish region in conflict torn Syria. Aras (2012) examines the Turkey's current position towards Kurdish region in Syria that well explains Ankara's unacceptance of emergence of any PKK-linked regions. Marcus (2007) provides a detailed analysis of PKK ties with Syria in the fight against ISIS. According to Noi (2012), the other important factor which boosted the Kurdish aspiration for autonomy is the Arab Spring and conflict in Syria in particular. There were even speculations that the Arab Spring could be followed by the so-called Kurdish Spring. Violent Kurdish terroristic organization PKK even attempted to duplicate Arab Spring by organizing Civil Disobedience Campaign in southeast Turkey.

Thus, the literature reviewed in this section implies that Kurds in Iraq do not pose security threat to Turkey. On the contrary the positive relationship is beneficial to both groups in terms of economic opportunities. The major reason for this harmonious relationship is that PKK does not have much influence in KRG. On the other hand, the literature unanimously agree that there exist tension between the Kurdish group in Syria and Turkey. The sour relationship is fueled by the presence of PKK elements in the group. Turkey is not ready to allow a group that it perceives

as terrorist to establish an administrative territorial entity closer to its borders as it could lead to the resurgence of conflict between PKK and Turkey.

### **3.4. Global Dimension of Turkey-PKK Conflict**

Park (2016) claims that due to Turkey's fear of strengthening PKK's position in the Middle East, Turkey is even ready for the deterioration of relations with the United States, which at some point was even ready to lift the label of terroristic organization from PKK so that America could further support freely Democratic Union Party-led forces in the struggle with ISIS. According Resch (2017), out of fear of PKK's impact over domestic Kurdish issue Turkey will continue to oppose strengthening PYD's position in Syria. Altunisik (2016) discusses three stages of the conflict in Syria in the light of Turkey-PKK relations and emphasizes that due to the importance of countering PKK-linked groups in Syria, Ankara is ready to oppose the US. As Lowe (2016) suggests, unresolved Kurdish issue in the Middle East has always been a big problem for the West. The situation deteriorated after the conflict in Syria as the Kurdish groups that have been most successful in the fight with ISIS are fiercely opposed by Turkey due to their links with PKK.

### **3.5. Conclusion**

The literature that has been briefly reviewed in this chapter provides insights into the issues considered here. They shed light on the unending conflict between Turkey and PKK on the issue of the Kurds' self-determination. The scholarly views outlined above suggest that Turkey feels threatened by the establishment of a Kurdish state backed by PKK and continues to use aggressive approaches against PKK to frustrate its efforts. On the other hand the literature explains why Turkey has warm relations with the Kurds in the Northern Iraq. The fact that the Kurds in Iraq have been opposed historically to PKK motivates Turkey to adopt good relations with them. As the literature shows, Turkey's unfriendliness to the Kurds in Syria is determined by the ambition of PKK to establish an autonomous Kurdish region.

## **4. Conflict between the Turkish government and PKK and how it affects the relationship with the Kurdish communities in Iraq and Syria.**

### **4.0. Introduction**

This chapter discusses the findings of the study. It discusses the Turkish administration's approaches towards Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria in the light of Turkey-PKK conflict. The chapter argues that the scope of PKK's influence over Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria shapes Turkish administration's policy towards the KRG and the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria – Rojava (DFNS). The chapter proceeds by first exploring the conflict between the PKK and the Turkish Administration. Factors that make the PKK a threat to the national interests of Turkey will be examined. The remaining parts of the chapter will try to explain how the PKK-Turkey ongoing conflict impacts Turkey's decision to support the KRG and oppose DFNS. In the final part, concluding remarks and the recommendations will be presented.

### **4.1. Conflict between the Turkish Administration and PKK (1960s-2000s)**

The Kurdish resistance, as stated above, was successfully suppressed after the Kurdish revolts in 1930s through different means of repression and assimilation policies. Due to the deep-rooted fear planted among the Kurds, the revival of the Kurdish movement, did not take place earlier than 1960s (Octem, 2011). The main factors behind the aforementioned development were the following, the resurgence of the Kurdish nationalism in Iraq arguably inspired by Mullah Mustafa Bardzani's arrival back to Iraq in 1958, establishment of multi-party democracy in Turkey that led to giving limited freedoms to the Kurds, and the emergence and spread of the leftist movements throughout Turkey in the framework of which the Kurdish nationalism re-emerged and on the basis of which later the PKK was founded by a group of the Kurdish students headed by Abdullah Ocalan (Yavuz 2001).

Before implementing relatively liberal policies towards the Kurds in 1960s, the Kurdish population was mainly concentrated in economically underdeveloped and far from the center mountainous areas in Turkey, but later many young Kurds were granted chance to leave their homes and study at the universities in cities that resulted in the formation of the middle class Kurds who had an education but limited job opportunities (Pusane, 2014). The founders of PKK emerged from later group of people. The Kurds actively used socialist discourse on the basis of which Kurdistan was presented as colony, while the Kurds were believed to be colonized people. Special attention was also attached to the economic backwardness of the Kurdish areas, which, as they claimed, was the result of the government's intentional policy (Gunes 2007).

Abdullah Ocalan has always been a central figure in PKK. He was not only the founder the organization but also inspirer of its ideology. He was born in the Kurdish village of Omerli in a poor family, which, as many believe, had reflected on his rejection of landowner and tribal leaders of the Kurdish community (Marcus, 2007). He joined leftist movements while studying at Ankara University. Abdullah rather later realized the political aspect of the Kurdish identity and mixed leftist ideas with the image of oppressed Kurds. His outrage was directed not only towards government but also Kurdish tribal leaders and landowners. According to Abdullah, those who did not share his ideas were enemies - be it Turks or Kurds (Yavuz 2001). Ocalan's aggressive ideology that implied the usage of violent means of resistance against the Turkish government at large were based on Iraqi Kurdish leader Mulla Mustafa Barzani's defeat in the struggle with Baghdad over autonomy in Iraq's northern Kurdish region. Although not all the Kurds very active supporters of Barzani, all the same, he was an undisputed symbol of Kurdish nationalism, therefore, his failure was a big disappointment for many Kurds. Ocalan took advantage of Mullah Mustafa's fiasco and heavily criticized him for demanding autonomy instead of independence. In the eyes of Abdullah Ocalan, Barzani was the representative of primitive tribal ideology that could never achieve success. He also insisted that the Kurds should act independently without relying on foreign support – be it the Soviet Union or the United States (Marcus 2007).

Abdullah based program of his organization on the fusion of unrecognized Kurdish identity and Marxist-Leninist ideas that aimed at establishing a Kurdish state (Akkaya & Jongerden 2011).

According to Abdullah Ocalan, peasant Kurds were exploited both by Turks and landowner Kurds. Thus, the PKK was hostile not only towards the government, but also Kurdish tribal elite, who, as they claimed, were taking part in the maltreatment of peasants and working class Kurds and also supported Turkish government in the assimilation of Kurds in Turkish society (Gunez, 2007)

Abdullah Ocalan presented PKK as the only representative of the Turkey's Kurds and fiercely opposed any other Kurdish groups rather than PKK. According to Ocalan, the only true fighter for the Kurdish rights was PKK. He was especially skeptical towards the leaders of Iraqi Kurdish region (Marcus, 2007). He considered himself as the only genuine leader of Kurdish movement who had the legitimate right to discuss Kurdish issue with such important political actors as, for example, the United States. In an interview conducted a year before Ocalan's imprisonment, he stated, "Barzani and Talabani are like feet or arms, but I am the main head or mind. The United States should speak with me, the mind. I have twenty-five years of experience" (Ocalan 1998, p).

Officially, the PKK was founded in 1978 November, but the war against the Turkish authority did not start until 15 August 1984. Initially, the primary goal of the organization was to liberate Kurds from all four states and establish an independent socialist Kurdish republic. The ideology of PKK was inspired by other anti-imperialistic movements in the world. In late 1980s and 1990s, PKK managed to attract wide popular support (Yavus 2001). A very good example of the sympathy with the PKK is perhaps the Kurdish revolts of Serhildan which took place in 1991 and 1992 in southeast of Turkey when most Kurds expressed their discontent towards the authority by boycotting and closing shops (Gunez, 2007). However, due to Turkish government's tireless efforts during the mid-1990s PKK was significantly weakened. In addition, with the collapse of the SU the PKK lost its ideological base and was forced to change its discourse. Due to the military and ideological crisis, the PKK was forced to announce unilateral ceasefire in 1993. Besides, ambitions of the PKK shrank tremendously, i.e. PKK was already content with the extensive autonomy. In 1998, the PKK launched unilateral ceasefires again (Gunez, 2007). A small extract from Abdullah Ocalan's interview in 1998 can prove an obvious change of his heart:

I accept the current Turkish borders. Nobody wants Turkey to be divided. This is very important! I want to negotiate a just, democratic solution to this twenty-year-old struggle. The Turks must accept the Kurdish identity. They should say in the constitution that there are other people in Turkey and accept a federal system, as in the United States, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, and Spain (Ocalan 1998).

Thus, the Turkish government's success in significantly weakening PKK militarily and the ideological crisis made it obvious that the creation of socialist Kurdish republic was not realistic any more and other, more relevant demands were needed that would allow the PKK to stay in the political scene as an important if not the most powerful political actor that fought for the rights of the Kurds (Akkaya and Jongerden 2011). Therefore, Ocalan mainly concentrated on the inevitability of recognition Kurdish identity from the side of the Turkish authority, apparent materialization of which would be adoption of federalist structure and giving autonomy to the previously denied Kurds. In addition, proposing federalism as a political solution of the Kurdish issue also meant that PKK was ready to reject already outdated communist ideology and embrace the West and democracy-oriented thinking. According to Abdullah Ocalan, because many western states, for example, the United States and Germany were federal republics themselves, suggesting federal structure as a cure to an acute conflict between PKK and Turkey could be more appealing than socialist system of governance.

As mentioned above, the demise of SU also forced Abdullah and his organization to seek an alternative to the Soviet ideology. In 1998 Ocalan already overtly criticized the Soviet Union and expressed its sympathy for the United States. He claimed:

It is not possible for us to be communists. Why the Soviet Union collapse and the United States did has not? It is because communism made the government everything, but the human being nothing. The United States represents development" (Ocalan 1998).

As it seems, although in the beginning Abdullah Ocalan fiercely objected and even criticized opponents who relied on the foreign assistance, but as a harsh reality convinced him later – Kurdish aspirations had no future without foreign support.

It has to be stated that the PKK was not the only Kurdish organization that presented itself as a protector of Kurdish rights at that time, there were many others – Turkish Workers Party (TIP), Kurdistan Democratic Party of Turkey (TKDP), Revolutionary Eastern Cultural Hearths (DDKO), Ankara Democratic Higher Education Association (ADYOD), , Revolutionary Democratic Culture Association (DDKD), etc. In Turkey in 1960-1970s was the boom of leftist movement that later was intertwined with Kurdish nationalism. However, none of the aforementioned organization became a real threat to Turkey's national security and territorial integrity. Although these organizations aimed to protect the rights of Turkey's Kurds, all the same, they were less decisive and less aggressive than PKK whose primary objective became armed struggle against Turkish government (Marcus, 2007). Abdullah Ocalan and his supporters came to the conclusion that the usage of legal means would not lead to the fulfilment of Kurdish demands (Akkaya & Jongerden 2011). Therefore, they focused their attention on armed struggle against the Turkish authority who after coup in 1980 became especially repressive and oppressive towards leftist groups. Accordingly, many of Kurdish and other leftist group members were arrested. Those who could escape the rage of government went underground (Gunez, 2007). Abdullah Ocalan moved to Syria in May 1979. It took him five long years to prepare carefully a plan of attacking Turkey. Due to Martial Law and other tough measures adopted by the new military government, it would be impossible to initiate a war inside Turkey. Therefore PKK organized armed struggle against the Turkey not from inside but outside - from Syria and Iraq. The PKK militants who were trained and kept over the years in Syria entered Turkey via Iraq. Despite the ideological divergence and rivalry between PKK and KDP, Abdullah Ocalan managed to reach an agreement with Masud Marzani, son of Mullah Mustafa Barzani and PKK attacked Turkey from Iraq (Marcus, 2007).

After Turkey forced Syria to expel Abdallah Ocalan from its territories, PKK leader was captured in Kenya in 1999. Due to the fear of worsening already a very difficult situation and diplomatic pressure from Europe, Abdullah Ocalan was not sentenced to death. The brother of Abdullah, Osman Ocalan intended to mobilize support of the Kurdish population around Turkey's attack on PKK leadership (Gunez, 2007). With the decision of the sixth PKK congress, ARGK was sent to fight an intense war against Turkish authority. However, Osman's plan failed. The PKK could not

attract mass support. During his trial, Abdullah Ocalan condemned Seiyh Said's revolts and praised Ataturk. He pledged allegiance to the republic of Turkey. On the base of Abdullah Ocalan's call some of the PKK leaders laid their arms in PKK networks in Europe. Some of the leaders surrendered themselves from Vienna and Austria (Yavuz, 2001).

Although not entirely defeated, the PKK has been tremendously weakened and ideologically transformed by imprisonment of its leader and inspirer Abdullah Ocalan. In 2002, the PKK was named as Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK). In 2005 PKK once again changed its name to Kongra-Gel (People's Congress) (Gunez, 2007). Today, the PKK is an extremely divided organization which consists of different groups, who have their own, in most cases, very divergent opinions, which, in turn, undermines significantly the peace negotiations between Turkish government and the PKK. As mentioned above, PKK consists of different actors, imprisoned Abdullah Ocalan and its supporters; the BDP (in full first) which is believed to be a political wing of PKK; PKK militants in Qandil mountains in Iraq under leadership of Murat Karayilan; diaspora in Europe, DTK Democratic Society Congress, which brings together different Kurdish NGOs; TAK Kurdistan Freedom Falcons - a violent Kurdish group believed to be responsible for terroristic attacks in principal cities; KCK (in full) - an umbrella organization which includes PKK and strives to establish a parallel administrative structure in Turkish republic (Pusane, 2014).

#### **4.2. PKK-Turkey Conflict after the Justice and Development Party (AKP)'s coming to Power (2002-present)**

Initially, the neo-Ottomanism doctrine emerged as a reaction to the domestic conflict with the PKK during the presidency of Turgut Ozel, the first president after the cold war era. However, the aforementioned new foreign policy strategy reached its acme under Recep Tayip Erdogan's the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) administration (Murinson, 2006). The neo-Ottomanism approach is based on Turkey's former foreign minister, Ahmed Davutoglu's strategic depth doctrine that implies deeper reengagement in the Middle East and most importantly

rejection of Kemalism and reembracing with the Ottoman past, i.e. instead of focusing on the Turkish ethnical nationalism uniting different ethnical groups under the shared Islamic identity. Thus, neo-Ottomanism, unlike Kemalism, does not see the Kurds as a threat as long as they do not threaten territorial integrity of the Republic of Turkey and therefore gives them more cultural and political rights (Taspinar, 2011). As Lisel Hintz rightly notes:

The AKP was able to convincingly and effectively cross the political red line of negotiating with Kurds as Ingroup partners because of the absence of an identity red line that deems the political recognition of Kurdishness anathema to Turkishness (Hintz 2016, p. 39).

Indeed, since AKP's coming in power the situation has changed in favor of the Kurds – limited engagement in the representative institutions, introduction of Kurdish language in educational system and public areas, promotion of Kurdish identity and protection of human right (Çiftçi, 2016). As one of the respondents stated despite immense negative effects, the conflict between PKK and Turkish government also produced tangible positive results - the Kurds have their own parties today, education in Kurdish at private institutions is permitted by law and free of charges and Kurdish books are freely published. The Turkish government is also trying to develop Kurdish regions by investing money in such spheres as universities, airports and high ways. However, the situation is still far from ideal. Although AKP's policy towards the Kurds is more inclusive, but not fully implemented. For example, although optional Kurdish language classes are officially included in curriculum of the public schools, some Kurds complain that they are denied of being enrolled in Kurdish language schools due to the lack of demand and absence of Kurdish language teacher (The Economist 2014). The survey conducted in July 2014 very well indicates the that exclusion of the Kurds on the base of ethnicity is still a problem. On the other hand, as the aforementioned survey demonstrates the Kurds themselves do not do much in order to become an integral part of the Turkish society :

Exclusion of Kurds on the basis of their ethnic identity was indicated as the main cause of the Kurdish question by 7% of the respondents in general, and 24% of the

Kurds. The nationalistic argument that Kurds have not adequately embraced Turkish culture was adopted by 20% in general and 7% by Kurds (Yilmaz 2014, p.6)

In the light of the aforementioned events it is perhaps important to attach attention to the possible explanations of Turkish administration's change of heart. After AKP's coming to power, the Turkish government became aware that it was impossible to resolve the Kurdish domestic issue only via aggressive military means and declaring the state of emergence in the Kurdish southeast regions. It became clear that without directly addressing the political, economic and social origins of the Kurdish resistance, it would be extremely difficult to find a solution to the domestic Turkish Kurdish question. Besides, after the imprisonment of the PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan, the position of the PKK has been softened significantly. In addition, the PKK lost its substantial portion of supporters within the Kurdish community of Turkey. Most of the Kurds saw that the armed struggle against the government did not bring positive results and focused on peaceful, democratic means of resolving their grievances (Larrabee & Tol, 2011). As one of the respondents noted the PKK-Turkey conflict has not been fully successful for both sides and resulted in pain and terror for both Turkey and Kurds. As the interviewee rightly stated the PKK-Turkey armed confrontation is no longer sustainable neither for PKK nor for the Turkish administration due to its tremendous loss. The Ambassador of Turkey to Georgia, Fatma Ceren Yazgan emphasized that due to the decisive political actions such as granting political and cultural rights to the Kurds to a large extent resolved domestic Kurdish issue, however, the PKK still possesses capacities of destabilizing Turkey.

It has to be stated that after coming to power the AKP has several times tried to resolve the conflict with PKK through negotiations. In 2009, the so-called Kurdish Opening was announced that intended to neutralize the violent aspect of the above mentioned conflict. However, due to the fear of antagonizing anti-Kurdish political elites, the AKP was forced to back and even changed the name of the initiative – first Kurdish Opening was referred as “democratic opening” and later as “national unity project” (Candar, 2009). Another attempt of disarming PKK took place in 2013.

On March 23, in largest Kurdish region Diyarbakir during the Navruz celebration a letter by Abdullah Ocalan was read to the public that called for peace and the withdrawal of armed forces from the territory of Turkey. However, due to Turkey's refusal to assist Syrian Kurdish town Kobani that was ambushed by the ISIS protesters against the Kurdish administration bloody clashes reemerged between those Kurds who protested Ankara's passiveness toward the grievances of Kobani Kurds and police. The aforementioned developments put an end to the AKP's initiative. In 2015, there was the last unsuccessful attempt of settling the dispute with the PKK. However, due to the impressive success of pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) in 2015 election and anti-PYD stance among political elites, the peace talks failed (Balta, 2016).

As it seems, despite Abdullah Ocalan's imprisonment and significant weakening of PKK positive tendencies after AKP's coming in power and its new, far more inclusive approach towards the Kurdish population, the threat of PKK has not been eliminated. Although domestic Kurdish issue has been to a large degree resolved by enhancing cultural and political rights of Kurds, all the same, PKK as the aforementioned developments showed, still has control over the Turkey's Kurds, i.e. if Turkish administration ignores Kurdish grievances or uses aggressive means against the Kurdish population, PKK can easily interfere and cause friction between a Kurds and the Turkish government. In addition, PKK also physically attacks Turkey by carrying out terroristic attacks on the soil of Turkey. Although the scale of the aforementioned terroristic activities is not as big as it was back in 1990s, such attacks are enough to destabilize the Republic of Turkey both politically and economically. Despite losing significant amount of supporters, the protest in the support of Kobani showed that PKK can mobilize the Kurds against the Turkish government. The fact that the conflict with PKK is still posing a tremendous threat to the security of the Republic of Turkey can be confirmed by the number of attacks PKK carried out on the Turkish soil. For instance, only in 2011 six terroristic acts were carried out – attack on a military Conway in Hakkari province, a car bomb explosion in Ankara, assault of Kurdish guerrillas on a police college in southeastern Siirt province, another attack of Kurdish guerrillas on a police station in Siirt province and a roadside bomb attack the Guroyimak distric (Al Jazera, 2011).

Turkish administration also opposes the PKK with different means and portrays PKK as a threat to Turkey's security and economic development. Although PKK does not directly announce its intention of establishing a Kurdish state, all the same, Turkish administration still sees PKK as impediment to the well-being of the Republic of Turkey. For instance, on the webpage of the Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs there is a section devoted to the PKK which gives detailed analysis of PKK's wrongdoings:

Turkey's tourism industry, economic infrastructure, educational Institutions, teachers, hospitals, public and private enterprises particularly in southeast Turkey have been the main targets of PKK terrorists. It uses a wide range of methods to carry out acts of terror ranging from attacking infrastructure, various facilities, schools and ambulances, kidnapping nurses, customs officials to using cyanide to poison drinking water supplies; and engaging in unconventional tactics, assassination to drive-by shootings, executing uncooperative civilians, ambushes, kidnapping etc. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, n.d.)

There are some unofficial webpages as well which try to discredit PKK, particularly in the eyes of the Turkey's Kurds. One of the websites even has the function of translating the texts in different languages which means that the anti-PKK propaganda is targeting not only the locals but also international community. For example, one can read the following information about the PKK on the above discussed webpage:

The PKK is a terrorist group that is Marxist, Leninist, Stalinist and communist. Under the pretense of defending Kurdish rights, it advances the communist cause in the Middle East. It is not at all interested in the welfare of the Kurdish people. In the present decade, secretive interest groups deeply entrenched in various American and European government agencies have revived the longstanding pipedream of an "Independent Kurdistan" in the Middle East. With help from the PKK, they would like to wrest the southeast of Turkey from the rest of the country (<http://pkkningercekyuzu.com>, 2015).

Today, the PKK is an extremely divided organization which consists of different groups, who have their own, in most cases, very divergent opinions, which, in turn, undermines significantly the peace negotiations between Turkish government and the PKK. As mentioned above, PKK consists of different actors, imprisoned Abdullah Ocalan and its supporters; the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) which is believed to be a political wing of PKK; PKK militants in Qandil mountains in Iraq under leadership of Murat Karayilan; diaspora in Europe, Democratic Society Congress (DTK), which brings together different Kurdish NGOs; TAK Kurdistan Freedom Falcons - a violent Kurdish group believed to be responsible for terroristic attacks in principal cities; Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) – an umbrella organization which includes PKK and strives to establish a parallel administrative structure in Turkish republic (Pusane, 2014).

Although with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Marxist-Leninist ideas lost their relevance, all the same, the founder and ideological father is still alive and even writes books about the political solution of the Kurdish question in the Middle East. However, Abdullah Ocalan is rather modest in his dreams about Kurdistan after spending nineteen years in prison and mainly focuses on federalism in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria which would guarantee autonomy of the Kurds. He writes in his book:

Democratic confederalism in Kurdistan is an anti-nationalist movement as well. It aims at realizing the right of self-defense of the peoples by the advancement of democracy in all parts of Kurdistan without questioning the existing political borders. Its goal is not the foundation of a Kurdish nation state. The movement intends to establish federal structures in Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq that are open for all Kurds and at the same time form an umbrella confederation for all four parts of Kurdistan (Ocalan 2011, p. 34).

The PKK gradually evolved under the leadership of Abdullah Ocalan who step by step constructed a bloodthirsty terroristic organization. As a result of deadly attacks carried out by the PKK and its affiliated groups Turkey has undergone a painful process of colossal human and economic loss. The PKK initial program posed a direct threat to the national security and interests of Turkey, which would result in breakup of Turkey. PKK managed to catch Ankara by surprise in the first phase of straggle, as PKK attacked Turkey not from inside, which would be extremely difficult

due to the adopted strict military measures that effectively neutralized the leftist movement, but from outside, namely, from Syria and Iraq. However, after the first shock the Turkish government succeeded in militarily weakening the PKK, which, in turn, resulted in softening PKK's position by limiting its demands and offering recognition of Kurdish identity and federalism as a political solution to the Kurdish question in Turkey, which is as unacceptable for Ankara as an independent Kurdistan. Although the imprisonment of the PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan gave another serious blow to the PKK, all the same, it has not been eliminated. On the opposite, as we will discuss below in detail PKK linked Kurdish forces even managed to consolidate its power and achieve significant success in Syria by spreading its control over Syrian territories. It is from this backdrop that the relationship between Turkey and the Kurdish groups in Syria and Iraq is shaped by the nature of threat posed by PKK.

### **4.3. Research Findings**

#### **4.3.1. Turkey's relationship with the Kurdish Region in Iraq**

Turkey-KRG relations have always been uneven. Friendly stance was often changed by a rather antagonistic approach and vice versa from Ankara's side. However, one clear fact is that Turkey has never been indifferent to the political developments in the Kurdish region of Iraq. Initially, Ankara's suspicions over Iraqi Kurdistan was caused by a Kurdish nationalist leader Mustafa Barzani's desire to involve the Kurds from Turkey and Iran in a collective fight for the Kurdish rights in 1960s (Pusane 2016). However, due to the intense inflow of the Kurdish refugees as a result of the the Iran-Iraq war, the Gulf war in 1991 and extremely cruel policy of Saddam Hussein's regime towards Iraqi Kurds, a safe zone in Northern Iraq was established at the demand of Ankara (Barkey, 2010). Moreover, when Turkey was combating Abdullah Ocalan in 1990s, Ankara was closely cooperating with KDP which was controlling the Turkey-Iraq border. In exchange to the Iraqi Kurdistan's assistance in the fight with PKK, Turkish customs office was turning a blind eye to the smuggling of diesel from Iraq which was the main source of income for the KDP (Gachechiladze 2003). Albeit, according to the decision of Turkish parliament, in

2003 the US was denied to take its troops into Iraq via Turkish territories (Oktem 2011). After the capture of Abdullah Ocalan Turkey kept troops in the southeast Kurdish provinces in order to prevent potential renewed attacks from PKK. Accordingly, the invasion of Iraq that implied enhancing autonomy to the Northern Iraq was perceived as a threat by Turkish administration that could re-encourage irredentist aspirations of Turkey's Kurds (Shiffrinson, 2006). Thus, it is no surprise that Turkey along with Iran and Syria supported territorial integrity of Iraq and fully disapproved Iraqi Kurdistan's yearning for establishing an ethnic-based Iraqi federation (Park, 2004).

However, the situation changed dramatically since AKP's coming to power which based its foreign policy on accepting secondary identity of Kurds that cannot be constitutionally acknowledged, but significantly eased relationships with Iraqi Kurdistan. Thus, the Turkish government based its policy towards KRG on the following principles: restrain Kurdish nationalism within the borders of KRG, increase Turkey's influence in the Northern Iraq, especially in the oil-rich provinces and find additional export market for the Turkish manufactured goods (Barkey, 2010). Gradually, Ankara has built strong economic partnership with KRG that was followed even by the establishment of a diplomatic mission in Erbil. Border between Turkey and Northern Iraq became merely formality - Turkey's Kurds freely go to KRG for trade or purposes. Intermarriage between Turkish and Iraqi Kurds is rather frequent (Cagaptay, Yolbulan 2016). Moreover, as suggested by Park (2014) many Turkish citizens work and have businesses in KRG and about 80 % of goods sold in Northern Iraq is produced in Turkey. As it seems, not only formal but also informal, people to people contact has even more deepened thanks to AKP's change of heart towards KRG. In the light of increased cooperation with KRG, Turkey has even withheld its support for the Turkmens residing along with Kurds in the oil rich Kirkuk province. Although Turkey never fully welcomed KRG's claims over the aforementioned resource rich region due to the fear that if Northern Iraq managed to obtain serious source of income it could easily claim for independence, but at least Ankara stopped backing Turkmens in favor of KRG (Barkey, 2010).

The cooperation between Ankara and Erbil reached its acme in May 2014 when despite fierce opposition by Bagdad and Washington a newly constructed pipeline to Cevhan on Turkish soil that was supposed to transit KRG oil field came into force (Park 2016). As the Ambassador of Turkey to Georgia, Fatma Ceren Yazgan stated even the US administration was surprised by the rapid and thorough improvement of initially unfriendly relations between Turkey and KRG. The US was in favor of relatively limited framework of cooperation with Northern Iraq, while Ankara intended to further enhance and deepen its relations with KRG by establishing close economic ties with the semi-independent Kurdish region in Iraq.

Another important aspect of KRG-Turkey relations is Ankara's intention to combat PKK groups operating in Qandil Mountain. By increasing Turkey's influence in Iraq Kurdistan, Ankara was also trying to enlarge its presence in the Northern Iraq in order to prevent PKK from strengthening its position in the mountains or cities of Iraq from (Selcen, 2016).

Lowe (2016) even suggested that given so dramatically improved relations with KRG, Turkey might not even mind independence of Northern Iraq. Indeed, Ankara-Erbil relationship faced a major challenge in September 2017 when KRG carried out a referendum over independence. More than 93 % of the population voted in favor of independence. However, Bagdad, Ankara and Iran along with The US, UK and the UN condemned the referendum results. President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced the vote results illicit and even threatened Erbil to cut out oil exports from KRG (Qiblawi, 2017). Unlike Lew's prediction, Turkey's response towards KRG's move towards independence was very harsh. Ankara along with Iraqi troops conducted military exercises at the border of KRG in order to warn Erbil that Turkey would not accept an independent Kurdish state near its borders. On September 27 three Turkish airlines canceled flights between Erbil and Turkey. In October 2017, airspace from and to Erbil was shut down. Erdogan in his speeches called referendum a mistake that became an impediment to the good relationship between Erbil and Ankara (Uyanik, 2017).

As it seems, Turkey is ready to cooperate with KRG as long as it within the jurisdiction of Iraq. Turkey is not ready to accept an independent Kurdistan at its borders. Although Ankara wants to

increase its influence in the Iraqi Kurdistan, all the same, independence of KRG is not in the interest of Turkey. Accordingly by increasing economic dependence of Iraqi Kurdistan on Turkey, Ankara tries to obtain more means of control over KRG. As mentioned above, in case of need, Turkey can freely use its leverage over the Northern Iraq by threatening to cut off economic resources or demonstrating military strength. Despite the tangible positive changes in resolving domestic Kurdish issue, Turkey does not need an independent Kurdish state near its borders. On the contrary, Ankara prefers relatively strong but semi-independent KRG which needs protection from Bagdad and is heavily dependent on Turkey in order to pursue its interest and control PKK

#### **4.3.2. Turkey's relationship with the Kurdish Region in Syria**

Turkey's relationship with Syrian Kurds has always been tense due to PKK's alarming influence over Syrian Kurds. However, before discussing current political developments, historical background should be perhaps briefly discussed in order to better understand Turkey's obstinate position on the advancement of PYD in Syria. The PKK which was and is a direct threat to Turkey's national interests has always had very close ties with Syria. In fact, if Abdullah Ocalan and his supporters had not been given a shelter and appropriate conditions in Syria, perhaps PKK would never be able to transform itself into a militarily strong organization that has shaken Turkey's political and economic stability several times.

After the coup in 1980, as mentioned above, massive arrests of the people connected with the leftist movement took place in Turkey. Therefore, activists involved in leftist's activities were forced to leave the country. Syria was a good solution, since it was easy to cross its borders. Accordingly, Syria was a safe haven, not only for the leftist extremists, but also PKK members (Marcus, 2007). Relations between Syria and Turkey were rather tense at that time. Accordingly, Damascus acted on the basis of the assumption that enemy of your enemy is a friend and gave a safe shelter to the PKK who intended to fight a war against Turkey (Carley, 2005). The reasons behind Syrian politics included: Damascus never accepted that Turkey took away Alexandretta province on the base of referendum carried out in 1939, Turkey and Syria had disputes over the

waters of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers and Damascus suspected Turkey in giving a shelter to the Muslim Brotherhood who was fiercely attacking the Syrian government. Because Syria was not able to militarily challenge Turkey, supporting Ankara's opposition groups seemed a good political bargain to Damascus (Marcus 2007; Carley 1995).

As Aras (2012) claims, Syria has historically been very supportive towards the PKK. Damascus allowed opening of a center where PKK militants were trained. Already tense relations between Ankara and Damascus were intensified due to Syria's close ties with PKK. Ankara made it clear that if Syria would not stop supporting PKK, Turkey would even consider carrying out a military offensive against Syria. As a result of the aforementioned efforts from Ankara's side, the Adana Accord was signed between Turkey and Syria and PKK was officially declared as a terroristic organization. Its camps in the Bekaa Valley were closed. Abdullah Ocalan was not only forced to leave Syria, but officially forbidden to enter Syrian territory ever again. In addition, Ankara was given a legal tool of controlling whether all the points of Adana accord were honestly fulfilled.

Not only Damascus has been supportive to Abdullah Ocalan and his combatants, but historically PKK has always had a big influence over the Kurdish community in Syria. According to Rech (2017, p.7), "In Syria, the severe repression of the Kurdish community and the inability of the Kurds to organize efficiently under the Assad regime had made the community very susceptible to the ideology of Öcalan, to whom Syria had granted political asylum after he was expelled from Turkey in 1990." Tensions between Damascus and Ankara over PKK re-emerged after the eruption of conflict in Syria in 2011. Although after settling dispute over PKK, Turkey established friendly relations with Syria in the framework of neo-Ottomanism foreign policy doctrine, all the same, after Bashar Al-Assad refusal to follow Ankara's advice to carry out reforms, Turkish administration backed opposition (Taspinar, 2012). The Syrian bloody conflict involves not only such regional actors such as Turkey, Iran, Iraq, ISIS, Kurdish forces, but also the US-led coalition and Russia. The US-led coalition, along with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar support the opposition, while Assad is backed by Russia, Iran and Iraq. Bloody conflict in Syria provided ISIS and other militant groups such as al-Nusra or Kurdish forces advantageous conditions for the extension of their influence (Al Jazeera, 2018). Most successful in the fight with ISIS proved to be

Kurdish groups including the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military extension Peoples Protection Units (YPG), which is backed by the US-led coalition, but is heavily opposed by Turkey. As Ankara claims, the aforementioned Kurdish forces are linked to PKK (Gunes, 2016). Due to the chaos caused by the conflict in Syria and the military success of YPG, Kurdish forces managed to establish a self-governing Kurdish *de-facto* region in Syria known as Rojava in 2012 (Rech 2017). As suggested by Khan (2015) Assad even granted autonomy similar to what the Kurds have in Iraq to its own Kurdish population.

As it seems, the conflict in Syria gave an opportunity to the PYD to establish itself as an important actor. However, there are suspicions that due to the need to combat ISIS and Turkey, as mentioned above Assad's regime along with Russia backs Kurdish forces. As Barfi (2016, p.31) claims, "Although the Kurds have proved the most effective ally fighting the Islamic State, their anti-rebel stance and relationship with the Syrian regime and Russians posed problems." Turkey, on the other hand, contradicts the consolidation of power of PYD which it believes is directly connected with the PKK. Turkey is even ready to go as far as carrying out military operations in order to prevent the aforementioned Kurdish forces from strengthening their positions in Syria and becoming immediate neighbor of Turkey. In 2016, Turkey started the Euphrates Shield operation against both ISIS and Syrian Kurdish militants (Reuters, 2018). In January 2018, Ankara launched Olive Branch operation targeting the YPG fighters (Stratfor, 2018). As it seems, turkey is not going to back and will continue striving against the advancement of Kurdish forces in Syria. As the Ambassador of Turkey to Georgia, Fatma Ceren Yazgan noted that it is not proper to fight one terroristic group with another. Her words are directly in line with the position of Erdogan who during the interview on PBSO NEWS HOUR expressed his concerns over the US's support of PYD and YPG in Syria. The president of the republic of Turkey stated that it is a mistake to try to eradicate ISIS by another – PKK affiliated terroristic forces (Youtube, 2017).

#### **4.3.3. The role of PKK in shaping Turkey's relationship with the Kurdish groups in Syria and Iraq.**

This section discusses the influence of PKK on the relationship between Turkey and the Kurds in Syria and Iraq. It seeks to demonstrate how PKK and its affiliated groups in Syria pose security threat to Ankara administration and how the not so influential position of PKK in Northern Iraq does not pose much threat to the Turkish Administration. The section shows that the responses of Turkey are determined by the nature and degree of threats from PKK groups in both cases.

##### **4.3.3.1. The influence of PKK on the relationship between Turkey and Kurds in Syria**

It is important to note that the conflict in Syria created the opportunity for the PKK to establish an independent territory, with the support of the Syrian government which considered the group as an asset in the fight against ISIS). As argued in the previously presented chapters conflict with the PKK tremendously affects Ankara's position towards Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria. PKK as discussed above poses a direct threat to Turkey's national interest and security. Therefore, Turkish administration is inclined to back those Kurdish entities that are in rivalry with the PKK and oppose the Kurdish groups that are linked to the PKK. In other words, the extent of the influence PKK has over the Kurdish groups shapes Ankara's stance towards the Kurdish communities in Iraq and Syria. Thus, Ankara's hostile policy towards PYD and its armed extension YPG is determined by the scope of influence PKK has on those organizations.

PYD was established by the former PKK militants in 2003 after PKK's dismissal from Syria. PYD does not deny being the member of (Kurdistan Communities Union) KCK - an umbrella organization that shares ideology and objectives of the PKK. PYD governs DFNS - the so-called de-facto autonomous region of Rojava on the base of Abdullah Ocalan's ideology of democratic confederalism that declares capitalism outdated and focuses on the bottom up governance. Accordingly, Rojava is ruled on the base of the following democratic principles –separation of religion and state, equality to women and other minorities (Gunes & Lowe, 2015). Although before the outbreak of a war in Syria the Kurdish population in Syria were denied full citizenship rights, after PYD's success in establishing a Kurdish de-facto self-governing region the Kurds can

freely teach and learn Kurdish that was previously impossible. Moreover, municipal buildings are decorated by the images of Abdullah Ocalan along with the Kurdish flags. Syrian Kurds wear pins with the depictions of imprisoned PKK leader (Parkinson, 2012). With the assistance of the US, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) headed by PYD created a proto-state across Turkey-Syria border (The Economist, 2017). The Kurdish self-governing entities in Syria are policing their areas. Kurdish municipalities provide public services and ad hoc courts. Assad regime governs Kurdish provinces along with the Kurdish forces (Parkinson, 2012). Holland-McCowan (2017) believes that about 20 % of PKK militants trained in Qandili Mountains are Syrians (Holland-McCowan, 2017). As the Ambassador of Turkey to Georgia, Fatma Ceren Yazgan has emphasized the PKK has always been closely linked to Syria. According to her, 25 % of the PKK fighters are from Syria. As mentioned before, PKK has historically been very close to Syria and its government. In fact, PKK even had an official representative in Damascus and the Syrian government was encouraging its population to join PKK and fight abroad. As one of the respondents highlighted, one of the main reasons why PKK might have a tremendous influence over Syrian Kurdish community is that a large number of notorious PKK war lords are from Syria. Although officially both PKK and PYD deny institutional links with one another and only focus on shared ideology, connection between these two organizations is obvious (Holland-McCowan, 2017). Moreover, the success of YPG might be the result of PKK's long experience of armed struggle (Gunes & Lowe, 2015). Given the undeniable ties between PYD and PKK, Turkey from the very beginning of conflict in Syria opposed advancement of PKK-affiliated Kurdish forces and called PYD to join Free Syrian Army (FSA) that would give only limited rights to the Syrian Kurds that was unchallenged even under Assad's regime. Ankara tried to balance the PKK by promoting KDP in Syria that could be an alternative to PYD (Yıldız, 2016). As Gunes and Lowe (2015) note "The KRG's first significant action with respect to the Syrian conflict was to support the unification of the Kurdish opposition in Syria in 2011 by bringing together Kurdish political parties other than the PYD under the umbrella body of the KNC". The Kurdish National Council (KNC) was supposed to balance PKK and present itself as a legitimate Kurdish actor in Syria. However, KNC or other Kurdish parties proved to be less efficient than PYD and could not undermine its position and authority in Syria

(Yıldız, 2016). As one of the respondents emphasized Turkey generally supports the Kurdish organizations or groups that are in opposition with the PKK. According to him, “Turkey no doubt uses my enemy’s enemy is my friend and divide and rule – policies against PKK”. In that regard support of KRG, particularly KDP is a very smart decision, because, as stated above, KDP and PKK have historically been rivals. In fact, as Marcus (2007) claims PKK initially has based its ideology on discrediting Iraqi Kurdistan leader – Mustafa Mullah Bardzani. Success of PYD, on the other hand, jeopardizes KRG’s authority in the region. Accordingly, it is in the best interest of KRG to back the Turkish administration in weakening PKK-affiliated forces in Syria (Holland-McCowan, 2017).

Thus, Ankara whose national interests are challenged by the advancement of PYD in Syria is even ready to conduct military operations in Syria and prevent PKK-linked groups from consolidating their power. In 2016, Turkey launched a military operation coded the Euphrates Shield Operation. As a result of this operation, “Turkey achieved the main initial objective of the military operation- preventing the unification of the westernmost Kurdish enclave with the bulk of the Kurdish-controlled territory” (Batashvili 2017, p. 5) The military operation dubbed the Olive Branch operation which was launched on January 20, 2018 also served to the same purpose of protecting national security interest of Turkey posed by growth of influence PYD and PYG in the Afrin region in Syria (Babiş, 2018). As Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the president of Turkey stated during the interview on PBSO News Hour, Ankara is targeting terroristic organization that is affiliated with PKK not Kurds. On the contrary, Turkey is inclined to have a friendly relationship with those Kurdish groups who have nothing to do with the PKK (PBSO News Hour 2017). However, it is not clear how Turkey would distinguish between Kurds who are pro-PKK and those who are against PKK in the same region. PYD and PYG are listed among the terroristic organizations on the web-page of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey with the following description:

PYD/YPG’s affiliation with PKK is clear. PYD/YPG was set up under the control of PKK terrorist organization in 2003. They share the same leadership cadres, organizational structure, strategies and tactics, military structure, propaganda tools, financial resources and training camps.

Accordingly, it is no surprise and is even justifiable for the Turkish administration to combat an advancement of terroristic organization right along its border even with aggressive methods. One has to take into consideration that apart from direct physical threat coming from the closeness of PKK strongholds, Ankara faces another rather difficult challenge, that is, the domestic Kurdish question. Historically, Syrian and Turkish Kurds have been very close. They have more commonalities with one another than with other Kurdish groups (Gunes and Lowe 2015). Therefore, out of the fear of PKK's increasing role in Syria and Iraq, Ankara was forced to toughen policy towards southeast Kurdish region that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of PKK fighters and civilians. Moreover, members of pro-Kurdish People's Democracy party (HDP) were arrested (Holland-McCowan, 2017).

#### **4.3.3.2. The influence of PKK on the relationship between Turkey and Kurds in Iraq**

As stated above PKK is ideologically opposed not only to the Turkish administration, but also tribal Kurds, that is land owners that oppressed peasant Kurds. Accordingly, Iraqi Kurdistan which up today preserves tribal structure is ideologically unacceptable for the PKK. In addition, PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan has always considered KDP and PUK as rivals. However, it has to be stated that historically PUK has always been closer to PKK (Marcus 2007). Although time to time there has been attempts to put misunderstandings aside as in 1983 when KRG granted safe haven to PKK in Qandil Mountains, relations between PKK and ruling party of the Northern Iraq KDP that has been historically more supportive to Turkey is very tense. Accordingly, KRG leadership believes that alliance with such a strong NATO member as Turkey is beneficial for the future of Northern Iraq (Holland-McCowan, 2017). As one of the respondents rightly noted KRG and Turkey have same economic and security interests. According to him, both Turkey and KRG are Sunni Muslims, while PKK initially focused on Marxist-Leninist ideas and later on confederalism. In addition, the respondent emphasized, Turkey and PKK share the same interests in the regard to Rojava. So Turkey does not want to encounter with a new PKK-associated terroristic organization at Turkey-Syria border, while KRG does not want another more powerful Kurdish

organization in the region. In fact, Turkey's need to balance growing influence of the PKK-linked Kurdish forces in Syria with the help of KRG even raised the hopes among Kurds in Northern Iraq that Ankara would tolerate the referendum that took place in September 2017 in KRG (Lihony, 2017).

As Tocci (2013) indicates improved relations between Ankara and Erbil cannot be explained solely on the base of the energy politics. She lists the sectarian division of Iraq, conflict in Syria and Turkish domestic Kurdish question as the main factors behind the shift from antagonistic to friendly stance of Turkish administration towards Northern Iraq. This thesis also argues that not so much economic-energy factors but national security interest determines Ankara's position towards both KRG and Rojava. As the Ambassador of Turkey to Georgia, Fatma Ceren Yazgan noted Turkey supports territorial integrity of both Iraq and Syria. Recep Tayyip Erdogan also said the same on PBSO News Hour. He notes that Turkey is in favor of territorial inviolability of Iraq and Syria (PBSO News Hour, 2017). Thus Turkey is determined to eradicate any possibility of establishing a Kurdish state that would affect the territorial integrity of Turkey.

An independent Kurdistan be it in Syria or Iraq might be an example for Turkey's Kurds to demand the same. Therefore, as the above discussed events connected with the referendum in KRG showed, Ankara contradicts any attempts of creating an independent Kurdish state across its borders. However, Turkey does not mind to have a politically relatively weak and economically dependent semi-independent Kurdish entity that it can use for balancing PKK and Iran if needed. In this way, a degree of influence PKK has over KRG and Rojava determines Turkey's different policies towards these two regions – Ankara backs Northern Iraq and tries to eliminate PKK-linked groups in Syria completely. Hypothetically, significant weakened or destroyed KRG equals the victory of PKK since it will be sole strong Kurdish actor. Therefore, it is in the interest of Ankara to support KRG and balance PKK's growing strength in the region.

In sum, the Turkey policy of opposing newly emerged Kurdish region in Syria and support of already existed KRG is in the best interest of Turkey. Northern Iraq has already been established as a legitimate actor in the political scene worldwide. As Seufert (2015, p. 2) notes , “ The US

intervention to defend the Iraqi Kurds against IS advances, and arms deliveries from Germany and Czech republic, both underline the international recognition of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq.” Accordingly Ankara cannot reverse historical events in that regard, however, the Turkish administration can still stop PKK- associated Kurdish forces from achieving what KRG already has – international recognition of its autonomous status. Moreover, as analyzed above, KRG, does not pose a threat to the national security of Turkey due to its rivalry with PKK and political and economic dependence on Ankara. On the opposite, Northern Iraq can even help to counter the growing threat coming from PKK-affiliated Kurdish groups in Syria.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis sought to examine the influence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) on the relationship between Turkey and the Kurdish regions in Northern Iraq and Syria. It demonstrated that Turkey has a harmonious relationship with the Kurds in Northern Iraq, while its relationship with Kurds in Syria is not so positive. Morgenthau's political realism very well explains Turkey's two absolutely different approaches towards the Kurdish regions. Ankara's foreign policy stance towards the KRG and Syrian de-facto Kurdish region are based on power maximizing and risk minimizing principle. Turkey supports the Kurdish community that is less exposed to the PKK influence in order to balance increased role of PKK in Syrian Kurdish region. As the Ambassador of Turkey to Georgia, Fatma Ceren Yazgan stated the KRG is an official unit with its institutional bodies that is internationally recognized. Therefore, Turkey supports KRG economically and politically. As for the Kurdish region in Syria, according to her, it is a PKK land with limited number of population. Her words justify treating KRG as an important political actor – although not fully independent, but to some extent officially recognized entity. As for Syrian Kurdish region, the USA support and the ability of self-determination gives legitimacy to the quasi-state of Kurdish region in Syria that is perceived as a number one ally in the fight against ISIS. In addition, Morgenthau's definition of a nation that implies perceiving an ethnic group that shares common characteristics as a nation elevates the Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria almost at the level of state.

The major recommendation of this study is that Turkey should follow the policy that it is already pursuing, that is, supporting KRG and weakening the PKK group in Syria since any significant debilitation of Northern Iraq would result in the strengthening of the positions of PKK-linked Kurdish forces in the region and worldwide. Although ISIS seems contained at the moment, the threat of its re-emergence is still very possible. The US and Europe will still need Kurdish forces to combat radical Islamic groups on the ground. In addition, Turkey should adopt less aggressive and more democratic approach towards the Turkish Kurds that will guarantee full protection of

their cultural and political rights, as any kind of repressive measures would make Turkey's Kurds more vulnerable to the propaganda of PKK.

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## Appendix 1:

### Interview Questions

1. What are the overarching characteristics of the PKK-Turkey conflict?
2. What is the specific PKK challenge for the Turkish administration at present?
3. How did the conflict between Turkish administration and PKK affect domestic Kurdish question?
4. How did the conflict between the Turkish administration and PKK affect the relationship between the Turkish administration and Kurdish communities in Iraq and Syria?
5. What issues are of main interest and concern to the Turkish Administration with regards to the PKK's ties to KRG and de facto Kurdish region in Syria?
6. Why did PKK have more means of control over Kurdish de facto region in Syria than KRG?
7. What risks do Kurdish regions in Syria and Iraq pose for the national security of Turkey?
8. Why did Turkey improve relations with KRG but oppose fiercely Kurdish de facto region in Syria?
9. What impact might the independence of Kurdish regions in Syria or Iraq (if ever obtained) have on domestic Kurdish question in Turkey?
10. What impact might Turkish administration's hostile policy towards Kurdish de-facto region in Syria have on Turkey-US relations?