ІСТОРІЯ

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THE ETHNIC QUESTION AND THE RISE OF POLITICAL CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST: COMPARISON OF TURKEY AND IRAN

This research seeks to analyze the relationship between ethnicity and political conflicts by juxtaposing Iran and Turkey. Indeed, while the polarization of ethnicity is evident in Turkey -a so-called 'hybrid regime' it has largely evaded authoritarian Iran. To understand this phenomenon, the research takes a historical approach and compares the political, cultural, social and economic context in which Kurds in Turkey were politicized while Azeris in Iran were not. The research also traces back the different strategies of national identity construction in both countries and explains their long term effect on ethnic minorities. It argues that, though the implementation of modernization sharpened the ethnic lines in both countries, due to the emphasis of religion Iran unified its minorities around the idea of Islamic nation, while Turkey alienated Kurds by introducing a territorial aspect to the notion 'Turkishness' and politicized them by imposing discriminatory policies in political, economic, cultural and social aspect of life. Research is important both practically as it compares the exceptional cases of the Middle East, and theoretically as it breaks the stereotype by showing that Muslim authoritarian rule goes along with ethnic minorities better than a so-called democracy. By juxtaposing Iran and Turkey this essay argues that national identity construction and economic, cultural, social and political conditions resulted in the politicization of ethnicity in Turkey while evading Iran. The essay will first take a retrospective approach to explain the creation of ethnic identities and will then assess the causes of conflict in the recent past based on four dimensions.

In all, the emerging domination of Turks over Kurds eroded the antecedent loyalty and reminded the distinction between these nations. While the importance of modernization, secularization and political centralization lay in the fact that they unwillingly lead to the creation of ethnic groups, in fact, these ethnic identities were hardened by the emerging phenomenon of 'turkishness' and 'iraniannes'.

Key words: *Turkey, Iran, modernization, ethnicity, political conflict.*

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ЕТНІЧНЕ ПИТАННЯ ТА ПІДЙОМ ПОЛІТИЧНОГО КОНФЛІКТУ НА БЛИЗЬКОМУ СХОДІ: ПОРІВНЯННЯ ТУРЕЧЧИНИ ТА ІРАНУ

Це дослідження має на меті проаналізувати взаємозв'язок між етнічною приналежністю та політичними конфліктами шляхом зіставлення Ірану та Туреччини. Дійсно, хоча поляризація етнічної приналежності є очевидною в Туреччині – так званому «гібридному режимі», вона значною мірою ухилялася від авторитарного Ірану. Щоб зрозуміти це явище, дослідження використовує історичний підхід, порівнює політичний, культурний, соціальний та економічний контексти і виявляє, що курди в Туреччині були політизовані, а азербайджанці в Ірані не були. Дослідження також простежує різні стратегії побудови національної ідентичності в обох країнах та пояснює їх довгостроковий вплив на етнічні меншини. Стверджується, що хоча впровадження модернізації посилило етнічні лінії в обох країнах, через наголос на релігії Іран об'єднав свої меншини навколо ідеї ісламської нації, а Туреччина відчужила курдів, ввівши територіальний аспект у поняття «турецькість» та політизувала їх, накладаючи дискримінаційну політику в політичному, економічному, культурному та соціальному аспектах життя. Дослідження важливі як на практиці, оскільки вони порівнюють виняткові випадки Близького Сходу, так і теоретично, оскільки вони порушують стереотип, показуючи, що мусульманське авторитарне правління йде разом з етнічними меншинами краще, ніж так звана демократія. Протиставляючи Іран та Туреччину, цей нарис стверджує, що побудова національної ідентичності та економічні, культурні, соціальні й політичні умови призвели до політизації етнічної приналежності в Туреччині, ухиляючись від Ірану. У статті спочатку використано ретроспективний підхід для пояснення створення етнічної ідентичності, а потім оцінено причини

конфлікту в недавньому минулому на основі чотирьох вимірів. Загалом, панування турків над курдами розмило лояльність попередників і нагадало про відмінність між цими народами. Хоча важливість модернізації, секуляризації та політичної централізації полягає в тому, що вони мимоволі призводять до створення етнічних груп, насправді ці етнічні ідентичності посилюються зароджуваним явищем «турецькість» та «іранське».

Ключові слова: *Туреччина, Іран, модернізація, етнічна приналежність, політичний конфлікт.*

Introduction. Recent years have seen a correlation between ethnicity and rising political conflicts. Thus, African states got more attention in this debate, in fact, successors of the multiethnic empires have been overlooked. Aiming to refill this gap in the research area this essay will focus on Turkey and Iran and will try to come out with an answer to the question why ethnicity has resulted in political conflict in the former but not in Iran. This research is important both practically as it compares the exceptional cases of Middle East, and theoretically as it breaks the stereotype by showing that Muslim authoritarian rule goes along with ethnic minorities better than a so-called democracy. By juxtaposing Iran and Turkey this essay argues that national identity construction and economic, cultural, social and political conditions resulted in politicization of ethnicity in Turkey while evading Iran. The essay will first take a retrospective approach to explain the creation of ethnic identities and will then assess the causes of conflict in recent past based on four dimensions. It is worth to note that, this essay takes a constructivist point of view and agrees with Horowitz's (1985a) definition of ethnicity which claims that 'ethnic groups are constantly created and recreated' (Newman, 1991a:464). The paper will limit itself by considering events from 1920 and onwards.

Case selection. Similar geographical location, belief in Islam, being successors of Ottoman and Persian empires respectively, makes these cases comparable and allows to apply the most similar systems design. Plausibly, the multiethnic structure of Turkey and Iran is inherited from their predecessor empires. On one hand, Persians only account for 51% of the population and are followed by 24% Azeris-Iran's largest minority (Byman et al, 2001). On the other hand, the figures in Turkey reveal that while Turks compose the 72.5%, Kurds constitute 12.7% of the population (World Atlas, 2017). Thus, according to statistics Iran hosts more ethnicities, it has mostly avoided the resurgence of conflict while Turkey with relatively fewer percentage of ethnicities failed to do so. Nonetheless both countries adopted similar policies at initial stages of development, with the emergence of Iranian Islamic Republic the minorities were unified under the umbrella of Islamic Sharia which led to a long-term stability. In contrast, by excluding Kurds in early Republic period Turks unwillingly initiated a conflict which got politicized in the last three decades.

Indeed, the official data reveals that from only 1983 to 1999 the conflict between Kurds and Turks resulted in 5000 dead and 10000 injured civilians (Jacoby and Tabak, 2015). The comparison of these cases below will suggest a plausible explanation to these diverse outcomes.

National Identity Construction. In discussion of ethnicity and political conflict, there is a need to take a historical approach and identify how the notion of ethnic identity emerged. Iran and Turkey both embraced modernization, which was followed by political centralization and secularization. Expecting to assimilate ethnicities and create a unified nation in return both states experienced the emergence of ethnic identities. Thus, while in Turkey ethnic identity was hardened following the recreation of Turkishness, by using the power of religion Iran overcame the possible politicization.

Modernization, centralization, secularization: Study of ethnicity in politics was evolved by various theories. Based on the writings of Marx and Durkheim the 20th century 'melting pot' modernization theory believed that modernization will lead to assimilation of ethnicities (Newman, 1991b). Hoping to build a strong centralized state with homogenous society, the majority of the developing states including Turkey and Iran implemented modernization. However, it turned out that disregarding ethnic, linguistic and class diversity in this process created ethnic identities while also stressing the civic aspect of the Azeri and Kurdish nation respectively. In Iran this period commenced with Reza Khan, the first king of Pahlavi, toppling Qajar dynasty from the throne in 1921 (Aghajanian, 1983a). Aiming to overcome the chaos after the collapse of Qajars' he gave a start to several reforms' first of which were the organization of strong army and political centralization (ibid). Political centralization included unification of Persian language and culture, resettlement of ethnic people, and intervention to local communities (ibid). Alongside, the introduction of secularization and westernism ideas, which could not be implemented completely, resulted in government facing off the highly religious local communities. In fact, as Atabaki claims, the Reza Khan's 'one country-one nation' motto was damaged by the revolt of Azeri's with the leadership of Khiyabani (Atabaki, 2005a:32). Opposing centralization and secularization, Khiyabani and his comrades demanded regional initiatives in the

reforms (ibid). Indeed, Newman (1991c) explains such mobilization by claiming that the creation of new ethnic ideologies, institutions and ethnic political identities was the result of the demolition of old ethnic loyalties. Consequently, the Khiyabani revolt stimulated other ethnic tribe risings' and plummeted with a nation-wide Nahbat-e Melli movement which pressured the government to abandon its despotic reforms and allocate more autonomy to provinces (ibid). Thus, the movement achieved success it also awakened ethnic minorities and made them realize their power.

Simultaneously, the creation of the Kurdish ethnic identity in Turkey was an obvious outcome of modernization. With the emergence of Turkish Republic in 1923 modernization, secularization and centralization reforms were executed. However, apart from Iran where reforms concerned all minorities, in Turkey these 'detribalization policies' systematically targeted Kurdish people in particular by prohibiting their language, clothes, even names and tribes (Yeğen, 2007a:222). Firstly, targeting tribes, which constituted the base of Kurdish identity, showed the secessionist nature of the policies (Yavuz, 2001a). Secondly, the economic centralization destroyed the last stand of possible Kurdish unification. This is because after the collapse of Ottoman Empire the Kurdistan was divided among three states, namely Turkey, Iraq and Syria thus, economic and trade relations between Kurdish people still existed (Yeğen, 2007b). The new regulations demanding Kurds to join national economy of Turkey hardened the national borders and cut the last tie of connection with their fellows (ibid). Lastly, the secularization introduced with the abolition of Caliphate in 1924 shifted Ottoman-Muslim millet (nation) to a secular Turkish identity excluding Kurds (ibid). In all, the emerging domination of Turks over Kurds eroded the antecedent loyalty and reminded the distinction between these nations. While the importance of the modernization, secularization and political centralization lay in the fact that they unwillingly lead to the creation of ethnic groups, in fact, these ethnic identities were hardened by the emerging phenomenon of 'turkishness' and 'iranianness'.

'Turkishness' and 'Iraniannes': In the 19th century after being defeated by Russians and signing peace treaties with Britain, the formation of new borders took place in Iran which led to the establishment of the highly territorialized Iranian identity (Atabaki, 2005b). Regarding territory as the source of Iranianness the state persuaded ethnic groups to fight for the territorial integrity of Iran, thus the uprisings' of Azeri's and Kurds' indicate that such definition triggered alienation rather than unification. Nonetheless, the religo-centric construction of Iraniannes with the establishment of the Iranian Islamic Republic changed the situation on a dime (Crane and Lal, 2008a). By using the amalgamating influence of Shia Islam, Iran easily overcame the Kurdish revolts especially in the 1980s (ibid). In fact, Ayatollah Khomeini skillfully used the religion while talking about ethnic minorities and by emphasizing the equality that Islam obliges he stated 'There is no difference between Muslims who speak different language… Everybody shall enjoy the protection of Islam' (Atabaki, 2005c:38, Crane and Lal, 2008b:42). Such legitimization of Iranianness proved itself in 1988 Iraq war when the content of war was depicted in 'Shia Iran versus Sunni Iraq' framework (Atabaki, 2005d). In all, by using religion Iran not only unified the minorities but also formed a feeling of attachment to the Islamic nation. Interestingly, in Turkey, the process occurred to be vice-versa. During Ottoman Empire, the Ottoman millet (nation) was defined by their religious affiliation (Akturk, 2009a). Thus, after the War of Liberation, the 'Turkishness' was reconstructed bringing the cultural and territorial aspect to the context (Somer, 2004a). The famous quote of Ataturk "happy who calls him Turk" is a great example of how territory replaced the religion as a tool of unification (Akturk, 2009b:894). On the other hand, regarding it as a betrayal to the Islamic brotherhood and to the alliance of Sunni-Islam the first uprisings of Kurds' took place during 1925–1938 (ibid). Aiming to preserve religio-tribal construction of Kurdish region, Sheik Said movement in 1925 mobilized hundreds of people. Thus, the violent assassination of Sheikh Said planted the seed of hatred and lead to continuous uprisings starting from the 1930s (Yavuz, 2001b). Nonetheless, with the rise of these revolts Turks stigmatized Kurd's as 'reactionary, backward, and dangerous' which caused to enter a new politicized period of Kurdish identity (ibid:8). Therefore, Somer (2004b:241) reveals that rebellions of 1920-1930 hardened Kurdish nationalism and as it was a 'two-way relationship' the rise of Turkish nationalism caused the same for the Kurdish. Nevertheless, at this point of the discussion one could argue that declaring the renewed ethnic definition of Turkishness as the origin of conflict could be misleading as, besides Kurds, Alevis, Lazs, Chechens are also Muslim. So the question arises why it was only Kurds but not the other ethnic groups who reacted aggressively to this change?

Economic, social, cultural and political aspects. In the discussion of distinct Kurdish early politicization, there is a need to look at the factors that contributed to it. To do so, Horowitz's (1985b) psychological dynamic to conflictual modernization theory will be applied to this case. By proposing a new approach

to the literature, he argues that though modernization created a base for ethno political activity, indeed this activity was deepened by the political, economic and social factors (Newman 1991d). This section will look at all four dimensions that contributed to the rise of ethnopolitical conflict in Turkey while preventing it from Iran.

Economy: Somer (2004c) argues that after the centralization, one of the main causes of Kurdish uprisings was the economic deprivation of Southeastern Turkey where 70% of the Kurds reside. Indeed, statistics reveal that while in western region GNP per capita accounted for 2000$, in the eastern region it was only 700$ (Icduygu et al. 1999a). In addition, though Kurd region is well known for its rich natural resources, its abundance does not contribute to the development of the region, rather benefits the extractors (Haddad, 2001a). Also, the South-East Anatolian Project (GAP), which had the aim to trigger the economic development of eastern part of Turkey with building dams on rivers excluded only Kurdish villages (ibid.). Plausibly, such economic discrepancy associated only with Kurdish region of the country forced people to question their ethnic identity and their economic dissatisfaction mobilized them. On the other, it is undeniable that modernization and centralization also resulted in economic differentiation of the regions in Iran. In fact, rising oil revenues and attention to industrialization while ignorance of agriculture, from which economic condition of minorities depended led to 'urban-biased economic growth' in Iran (Aghajanian, 1983b: 222). However, after Azeri's 1945–1946 revolution Iran decided to preserve good relations with the biggest non-Persian minority and promoted their business and economic activities (Crane and Lal, 2008c).

Culture and society: While economic struggles triggered a discontent, Kurds being the social and cultural target created an irremediable tension. Firstly, after the establishment of Turkish Republic Article 42.9 of the new constitution banned the use of all other languages (Human Rights Watch, 1999). In addition, the Kurdish villages were renamed by new Turkish names (ibid). The prohibition of publishing in Kurdish in 1983 and still ongoing restrictions on broadcasting and political activities suppressed the Kurdish people (ibid). Moreover, although primary education is compulsory in Turkey according to statistics the 'two Kurdish men in every five and two Kurdish women in every three' has never attended schools (Icduygu et al, 1999b). Consequently, the lack of education and inadequate expertise in Turkish restrict the economic opportunities available to Kurds (ibid). Indeed, according to Dune (Haddid, 2001a), 3 out of 12 million Kurds have moved to urban cities

because of the limited workplace and as Icduygu et al. (1999c) reveal the left majority turned their head to radical terrorist movements like PKK. Nonetheless, while Iran also conducted language centralization at the beginning of 20th century, afterward the Article 15 of the constitution of Iran-Islam Republic permitted the use of minority languages at schools and media (Atabaki, 2005). Also, the growing number of faculties in ethnic languages resulted in the exchange of cultures and further ensured homogeneity (ibid). Subsequently, Iran's cultural and social policies towards ethnicities contributed to the stability in its political arena.

Politics: Though Turkey is considered to be the most democratic country in the region, in fact, it is also the one subjugating the political rights of the minorities. Starting from 1990s pro-Kurdish journalists were prisoned and the newspapers were prohibited (Haddid, 2001c). Only in 1993, 107 journal workers were fired because of their support to PKK (ibid). In case of demanding linguistic or cultural rights political parties are still accused for 'creating minorities'(Human Rights Watch, 2017). Thus, it is worth to note that Turkey's cooperation with the EU and will to become its member has put an obligation on its shoulders about the ethnic minorities. Indeed, the 1991 law which lifted linguistic restrictions was due to EU's pressure (Somer, 2004d). Also, President Demirel took a step for reconciliation by recognizing his Kurdish ties (ibid). However, such essentialization of Kurdish identity, in contrast, led to the increase of Kurdish mobilization. Also, the fact that Turkey's candidacy was denied by the EU commission in 2018 makes it hard to foresee the further evolvement of ethnic politics in the country. On the other hand, in the discussion of the political context, Iran has obviously granted more rights to its minorities. The establishment of Azerbaijani Democratic Government in 1945–1946 and its one-year long autonomy challenged Iran to rethink its policies towards Azeris' (Grebennikov, 2013). In this regard especially the Khomenei government is known with its sympathy towards Azeris (ibid). After 1990s Azeris took an active part in the political arena of Iran and are well represented in the bureaucracy and military (ibid). It is worth to note that the Supreme Leader of the Iran Ali Khamenei is also ethnically an Azeri (Crane and Lal, 2008d). In all, though economic, social, cultural and political suppressions have in their turn triggered mobilization of Kurds, Turkey's non-linear and discriminative politics have made ethnopolitical uprisings inevitable.

Though the creation of ethnic identities has evolved in last century, its politicization is a recent phenomenon. While modernization, secularization, centralization in both countries defined ethnic minorities its hardening

came along with the recreation of 'Turkishness and Iraniannes'. On one hand, by creating a religo-centric government Iran defeated security threats related to its minorities. On the other hand, the economic, social, cultural and political despotism of Turkey woke up the 'sleeping' Kurds. Though this essay emphasizes the religion's unifying power, for a more accurate analysis the scope of the research should be widened and further comparisons of Middle Eastern states should be conducted.

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