



UNDERSTANDING INTRA-ETHNIC CONFLICTS THROUGH A YOUTH LENS: THE CASE OF THE INTRA-KURDISH CONFLICT

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Introduction

By examining the views and experiences of Kurdish youth entangled in the crossfire of enduring in-group violence between the ultra-Islamist Kurdish Hizbullah (KH)¹ and the leftist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK),² this policy brief aims to illuminate the critical and pivotal, yet frequently overlooked, perspective of youth concerning intra-ethnic conflict and its peaceful resolution.

While much attention has been devoted to youth engagement in ethnic armed conflicts, the role of young people in intra-ethnic fissures and their peaceful resolutions has remained a relatively understudied topic. However, as the Kurdish case illustrates, young people often become major spearheads of intra-ethnic conflicts, finding themselves fighting their own ethnic group. The key question, then, becomes what motivates young people to direct violence to their co-ethnics and how they can take a role in transforming intra-ethnic fissures.

Taking the intra-Kurdish conflict between the KH and the PKK, which has claimed

¹ The PKK emerged as a dissent movement in the 1970s to establish a free and independent Kurdistan based on Marxist-Leninist principles. Its emergence as an armed group marked a new start for the Kurdish question as it kicked off guerilla warfare against Turkey in 1984 (Beriker-Atiyas, 1997). The Turkish state initially did not perceive the PKK as a serious threat (Efegil, 2008). Yet, the PKK gradually turned into a mass movement that garnered broad-based support from the Kurds in Turkey (Özcan, 2006).

² The KH emerged as an armed, fundamentalist Islamist organisation with the aim of ousting the secular regime in Turkey and establishing a Sharia-based entity. The KH is not connected to Hizbullah in Lebanon despite sharing the same name. The KH was formed in the Kurdish region and consisted mostly of Kurdish people, and was primarily driven by the religious ideals rather than ethnic Kurdish concerns.

thousands of lives since the 1990s, this policy brief delves into the fluid dynamics of peace and conflict from the youth perspective. The intra-Kurdish conflict came to an end at the beginning of the 2000s when the KH laid down arms. In 2012, the KH transformed itself into a political party, namely the Free Cause Party (HUDAPAR).³ Since then, HUDAPAR has been in rivalry with the People's Democratic Party (HDP).⁴ This political competition has been intermittently resurfacing in violent forms and targeting civilians, particularly the Kurdish youth.

This policy brief is based on in-depth interviews conducted with 21 young people affiliated with the HDP and the HUDAPAR, residing in the city of Diyarbakır and aged between 21 and 33. Out of the interviewees, 11 were male while the remaining participants were female. Moreover, 10 of the interviewees represented the HDP while the rest were from the HUDAPAR. The selection criteria were based on their voting preferences, including individuals who were both party members and non-member voters.

Drawing from the interviews, the policy brief provides comprehensive analysis of the intra-Kurdish conflict through a youth lens. Following a concise background of the conflict, it firstly explores youth's role in this particular context. Then it presents firsthand narratives gleaned from the in-depth interviews, offering insights into the perspectives of the young people and their nuanced understanding of the intra-ethnic conflict. Lastly, the policy brief offers recommendations derived from the interviews, aiming to facilitate youth-oriented peaceful resolutions of such conflicts.

Background

Parallel to the ethno-political conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK, the Kurds in Turkey also witnessed a violent fissure between two Kurdish-led armed groups, namely the PKK and the KH.

Although both organisations were initially motivated to wage a war against the Turkish state for different political goals, they found themselves fighting each other. The bloody conflict between the KH and the PKK erupted in the early 1990s following the PKK's attack on a Hizbullah-affiliated house in the town of Idil (Kurt, 2017). Soon after, the conflict escalated and quickly spread to other Kurdish-majority cities such as Batman, Diyarbakır and Mardin.

The violent intra-Kurdish conflict ended in the late 1990s, coinciding with a substantial decline in activities by the PKK and the KH. In 1999, Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the PKK, was apprehended by the Turkish state. Simultaneously, Huseyin Velioglu, the leader of the KH, was assassinated by the Turkish police in 2000. In the subsequent months, an extensive crackdown on the KH was initiated, leading to the detention of thousands of its members. This compelled the KH to go underground and ultimately resulted in an unofficial ceasefire between the PKK and the KH. Although precise casualty figures have remained unavailable, it is conservatively estimated that over a thousand people were lost to the conflict (Kurt, 2017). The situation remained relatively stable until 2014.

³ In 2004, the KH transformed itself into a civic movement and re-emerged through establishing the Association for Solidarity with Oppressed (Mustazaf-Der) (Kurt, 2017). However, Mustazaf-Der was closed down in 2012 following a court order over its alleged link with the Kurdish Hizbullah (Habertürk, 2012). After the dissolution, the movement decided to form a political party called Free Cause Party (HUDAPAR).

⁴ The HDP is a pro-Kurdish political party, constituting the third-largest party in the Turkish Parliament.

Relations soured once again during the local elections in 2014 when one member of the HUDAPAR was assassinated and another was abducted by the PKK (Kurt, 2017). Subsequently, the HDP leaders called upon their supporters to protest the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) siege of Kobane, a Kurdish-populated city in Syria, in late 2014 (Kamer, 2020). What started as peaceful protests soon turned violent and sparked a new wave of in-group clashes between the supporters of the HDP and the HUDAPAR. The unrest quickly spread to almost all Kurdish cities. Local HUDAPAR offices and the Hizbullah-affiliated organisations were targeted by the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H), the urban-based youth wing of the PKK (Kurt, 2017). In response, HUDAPAR-affiliated youth also mobilised through social media and went out for retaliatory actions (Kurt, 2017), and the clashes ultimately resulted in the loss of 50 people (Dağlar, 2014). Further confrontations occurred during and after the electoral campaign in 2015, causing additional casualties (Cumhuriyet, 2015).

In the second episode of the conflict, mirroring the initial episode, a substantial number of these casualties were young individuals. Moreover, the primary participants in the clashes were predominantly youth. This has prompted discussions about the roles played by young people in this conflict, a topic I will further explore in the following section.

Being youth in the intra-Kurdish conflict: roles and experiences

Youth as perpetrator

Kurdish youth, just like their counterparts in other conflict-ridden areas, have been one of the major spearheads of the intra-Kurdish conflict. In fact, student-led organisations and their engagement with violence were a prevalent phenomenon in Turkey throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The PKK and the KH were no exceptions, being led by two Kurdish youths who believed in violence as a means to attain their political objectives.

A study conducted by the Turkish police in 2000 indicated that 63% of Hizbullah militants were under the age of 29 (Çakır, 2011) and the vast majority of those militants were aged between 13 and 18 (Kurt, 2017). Similarly, another study reveals that 83.5% of the PKK militants are under the age of 25 (Bagci & Gullu, 2015) and the average participation age of those militants is 19.4 (Özcan & Gürkaynak, 2012). These studies demonstrate that both the PKK and the KH are mostly composed of young militants. Indeed, both organisations purposefully targeted youth for their political ends. Nevertheless, this was not a unilateral process. Various factors contributed to the engagement of young people in these organisations and ultimately led to their involvement in this intra-ethnic conflict.

First and foremost, Turkey's full-scale war with the PKK resulted in severe conditions for the Kurdish people. Starting from 1984, nearly 3,500 villages and hamlets were evacuated and around 4.5 million Kurdish people were forced to leave their lands (Çelik, 2005). Secondly, the increasing tensions and ideological divisions within the Kurdish political landscape created existential uncertainty for forcibly displaced Kurdish youth, who were seeking protection and solidarity in shanty towns. This uncertainty compelled Kurdish youth to align themselves with existing Kurdish groups. Lastly, the state's pressures on Kurdish individuals and mass violations of human rights in the Kurdish-majority cities also pushed these young individuals to search for a collective identity and organised movements that could effectively respond to the challenges they faced. Caught between the pressure fuelled by the state, the PKK and Hizbullah, on the one hand, and severe consequences of migration, poverty and despair, on the other, this

enraged “newly-urbanised youth” became a fertile recruitment pool for both the PKK and the KH (Çelik, 2021). Both organisations were practically successful at transforming outrage of this poor and disadvantaged youth into “a feeling of group belonging” and a “notion of the pursuit of a high ideal” (Kurt, 2017).

Youth as victims

Youth also represents one of the most affected groups in this intra-ethnic fissure. While comprehensive statistical data regarding the age distribution of victims in this conflict is not available, in the 6-8 October clashes out of 50 casualties 32 were under the age of 30 (Dağlar, 2014). Apart from being direct targets of violence, their transition to adulthood is disrupted in various ways, and their economic, social and psychological wellbeing is disproportionately affected.

As both groups tried to organise in high schools and universities to ensure social control and dominance in youth circles, this often resulted in young people of both sides having physical confrontation with knives and sticks (see Kurt, 2017; Çelik, 2021; Jenkins, 2008). A last example of this took place at the Dicle University in Diyarbakır in 2014 when pro-HDP and pro-HUDAPAR students fought over a stand that was set up by a HUDAPAR-affiliated student organisation for an Islamic event (Altıntaş, 2014).

Intra-ethnic diversity including variations in language and religious beliefs can be catalysts of intra-ethnic bullying (Kuldas, Foody & Norman, 2022). In-group victims can experience bullying when they diverge from the group norms (Wright et al., 1986). In relation to the in-group rivalry over controlling the high schools and the universities, bullying was commonly observed among the politicised Kurdish youths, which had an enormous impact on their psychological wellbeing. Many students were reportedly bullied and threatened by their Hizbullah peers due to their relationship with the opposite gender (Akin & Danışman, 2011). Acknowledging this, Hizbullah members assert that they successfully reduced “the number of depraved mixed meetings” and thwarted potential “natural inclinations by separating the desks of male and female students” in schools (Yılmaz et al., 2011). Their endeavour to enforce an Islamic lifestyle caused lasting fear among the students, particularly female students who were more susceptible to violence. Many young women were forced to adhere to Islamic dress codes and many of those who resisted had to face the dire consequences, including acid attacks on their faces (Kurt, 2017).

The conflict has also deprived the Kurdish youth of better socioeconomic conditions. Many of them had to drop out of school due to ongoing conflicts. A considerable number of young students had to leave their homes to escape from indiscriminate attacks of Hizbullah (Akin & Danışman, 2011). The conflict further soured job opportunities for the youth, who were already dealing with the dire consequences of the conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state.

Intra-Kurdish conflict analysis through a youth lens: what causes violence among co-ethnics?

Recollection of past events

The interviewees from the HDP and the HUDAPAR underscore the pivotal role of memory in this intra-Kurdish violence. They are of the opinion that the conflict has been periodically revived through the recollection of past events. The narratives passed down

by the older generation about the violent events in the 1990s hold a significant place in shaping their perceptions of the in-group conflict. These narratives appear to consolidate the young participants' allegiance to their respective groups, often tending to portray their own side as victims and the opposite side as the perpetrators when recounting past events from the 1990s. While they share different accounts, there is a consensus among the young participants that the lingering sense of revenge, hatred and trauma led by the violent episodes in the 1990s serves as one of the primary catalysts for the ongoing conflict:

"We can come all the way from the 90s to these days. In the 90s, they [PKK] made all kinds of plans and projects to exterminate Muslim-Kurds, Muslims, and they martyred them. There have been massacres in these lands."⁵

"Both sides faced too many deaths. Thousands of people died. There are people who have lost at least 4-5 people in their families, right before their eyes. It's a traumatic process. It's a situation caused by trauma. You know, there's that revenge thing."⁶

Ideological division and power struggle

Another dominant theme shared by the participants from both parties is the power struggle arising from ideological division. Youth groups affiliated with the parties believe that there is an ideological conflict between secular and leftist ideology and ultra-Islamist principles. Although ideological conflict does not invariably result in intra-ethnic armed violence, the Kurdish case, according to the young interviewees, illustrates how such differences can lead to a power struggle and dominance, eventually culminating in violence. In this regard, the pro-HUDAPAR respondents argue that the PKK and the HDP sought to eliminate all other Kurdish movements regardless of their ideologies in order to assert dominance over the Kurdish socio-political sphere. They claim that the KH and the HUDAPAR have effectively challenged this hegemony, thus the conflict erupted:

"The primary source of these attacks is the ideology of the PKK... It stems from the fact that, wherever the PKK has established influence and gained power, be it a classroom, a family, or a state, it does not accept any authority other than itself."⁷

Conversely, the pro-HDP youth contend that the opposite group rose to establish a Sharia-based structure through dominating the region ideologically and hence, its ambition has engendered a power struggle with the PKK and the HDP, ultimately ended up in violence:

"I think the problem is exactly this: It is a situation related to the regime type. While one side is based on the religious form of government, the other side demands a democratic form of government. I can say that this is one of the primary causes of conflict."⁸

The role of third parties

The young participants also argue that the third parties wield a significant influence in the conflict. According to them, the Turkish (deep) state and other western countries

involved further deepen the schism between the groups and ensure that conflict remains unresolved as such a peaceful resolution would not serve their interests. Notably, it should be mentioned that the participants are more inclined to accuse the opposite group of collaborating with the third parties. The pro-HDP respondents assert that the Turkish deep state mobilised and supported the KH and later the HUDAPAR to balance the rise of the PKK and the HDP and to obstruct the unification of the Kurds under the pro-Kurdish movement:

“The HUDAPAR is used as a tool because the HDP is seen as a group that needs to be always kept weak and suppressed. It is my opinion. Otherwise, if you look at it, many pro-HUDAPAR people say why we fight with the HDP.”⁹

On the other hand, pro-HUDAPAR youth believe that the PKK and the HDP serve as an instrument of the third parties, which they call “imperialist states” to exploit the Muslim Kurds in various aspects. The pro-HUDAPAR youth consider the party cadre of both the HDP and the PKK as the agents of external actors pursuing shared interests:

“I can say that the only problem is that their rulers do not belong to this land; that they work for different countries, come from those countries.”¹⁰

In this regard, it can be argued that the participants perceive the intra-Kurdish fighting as a provocation and manipulation by the third parties that utilise conflicting groups as tools to pursue their own social, economic and political agendas.

Conclusion

Rooted in a complex interplay of historical grievances, socioeconomic disparities and ideological differences, the intra-Kurdish conflict has a profound impact on the Kurdish youth. Their experiences highlight the vital role of memory and ideology in perpetrating violence against their co-ethnics, often claimed to be manipulated by external actors. To effectively address intra-Kurdish conflict and similar in-group fissures, it is imperative to prioritise the needs and perspectives of youth, ensuring their active participation and leadership in peace efforts. By acknowledging their experiences and aspirations, we can pave the way for a more inclusive and sustainable resolution to the intra-Kurdish conflict and similar conflicts within the broader Euro-Mediterranean region. Finally, based on the interviews with young people, this policy brief presents the following recommendations to offer insights into the peaceful resolutions of in-group fissures, using the intra-Kurdish conflict as a case study.

Recommendations for a peaceful resolution

Facilitate dialogue channels

“Let’s use politics effectively. I think this is the most important. Let’s make politics, let’s talk and come together. So, when we come together, we don’t have to make peace. But we can solve the problems between us.”¹¹

“The point I would recommend to both sides is this: write down what you have thought of each other so far. Then think about rights and wrongs you did with each other. Then I would exchange what they wrote.”¹²

As interviewees have said, the prolonged violence has hampered interactions and fostered intolerance, disrespect, and hostile attitudes towards each other. Thus, it is of the utmost importance to build new avenues for the conflicting parties to engage in meaningful dialogue. Such a process should address the root causes of in-group conflicts, cultivate common ground for conflict resolution, and be an integral part of peace efforts. Prioritising mutual understanding, empathy, respect, tolerance, social cohesion and co-existence, the dialogue should engage all affected parties, ensuring an all-inclusive participation.

Commence memory work and reconciliation efforts

“Yes, perhaps coming to terms with the past... After dealing with the past, what can be done in the name of reconciliation? Our demand, of course, is let’s face it. Let the positives and negatives be discussed.”¹³

“The 90s is a mystery. It eventually turned into a conflict... I acknowledge and know that both sides made mistakes... I believe that the events of the 90s should not be repeatedly fuelled. If the 90s are to be talked about, I think all parties should be at the table, and everything should be discussed.”¹⁴

The lingering memories of the conflict continue to significantly affect the people living in this conflict zone. Transmitted through narratives across generations, these memories are seen by the young participants as a pivotal obstacle to the lasting peace. Furthermore, according to the sampled youth, the existential uncertainty bred by violence compels people to establish connections with their collective identity and parties through the narratives, which fuels the schism and the sense of revenge, and ultimately triggers renewed outbreaks of the conflict. Therefore, a comprehensive approach should be adopted to deal with the past. The memories from both the first (1990) and the second episodes of the conflict (2010s) should be addressed holistically to break the cycle of the violence.

Draft a comprehensive peace agreement

“To resolve this conflict, and to prevent potential problems, I would probably request an agreement that could embrace everyone... An agreement that can include many groups in a humane, democratic way. Do you know why I always refer to an agreement? It is about not trusting the parties, not trusting the parties that will come after that, not trusting people.”¹⁵

“For us, peace means making people feel comfortable by enacting the constitution accordingly and ensuring the safety of life and property regardless of language, religion, race, or sect.”¹⁶

The participants emphasise that the conflict can be reproduced any time, causing the repetition of the wrongdoings in the past without an official safeguard. Their persistent call for a well-written peace agreement contains three important aspects. Firstly, they were able to closely observe the

failed peace process between the PKK and the Turkish state in 2015, attributing the failure in part to the absence of a formal agreement. Secondly, their distrust in party leaders led them to have a belief that these elites might spoil any process if their interests are jeopardised. Thirdly, the youth highlight the increased violations of their human rights after the failed peace process in 2015 and fear that any return to violence could further endanger their rights. In this regard, an official peace agreement that safeguards the rights of youth and other individuals should be the final part of a peace process following commencement of dialogue, memory work and reconciliation efforts.

Engage youth in peace-building process

“The solution is inclusion of every faction. Especially young women, young men, and groups with other social identities such as LGBTs, Alevis... I would like to include anyone who finds themselves in a different identity. I mean everyone who has a say. But I would like the youth to be the first group to be included.”¹⁷

“If I were at the peace table, I would express that young people should also be decision-makers and have a say at this table. I would say that the youth should be empowered, that young people should be in a good position, that youth should be given the right to speak, and that young people should be given leadership.”¹⁸

Young people who are major stakeholders of the conflicts are generally left out of decision-making processes, particularly the peace processes. Their voices and perspectives are barely heard and often overlooked, resulting in their marginalisation and exclusion from socio-political spheres. This exclusion, as highlighted by the sampled youth, is directly linked to their active involvement in violence. According to the participants, young people’s political participation in such efforts is undervalued by the elites who perceive youth as “ignorant” and “inexperienced”. Consequently, the lack of platforms and avenues for the youth to voice out their feelings, opinions and concerns fosters radicalism among young individuals. Thus, nurturing and promoting youth participation and leadership in such processes is crucial. As underscored by the young interviewees, young people are more open to dialogue and receptive to innovation which are essential for effective peace-building initiatives. Therefore, their opinions and perspectives should be taken into consideration in the context of intra-Kurdish conflict and other similar intra-ethnic disputes.

Note: The actual names and identities of the participants are not revealed to ensure their security. Each participant is assigned a pseudonym for confidentiality.

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