Cont Islam (2017) 11:157–169
DOI 10.1007/s11562-017-0378-6

Ethnic reforms and the puzzle of public framing: the case of Kurds in Turkey

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Published online: 6 February 2017
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Abstract Will pro-Kurdish reforms decrease ethnic violence in Turkey? Conventional wisdom would suggest that elimination of the root causes will heal past wounds. In bitter ethno-political conflicts, however, the issue becomes much larger than its components: deep mistrust between parties overshadow specific issue reforms. Turkey's Kurdish issue is a case in point where ethnic reforms would not bring stability unless they are coupled with steps to eliminate mistrust. This article pays a specific attention to public framing of reforms. We argue that the actual content of reforms is not so significant; what really matters, instead, is the *public perception* of reforms on both sides, Turkish and Kurdish. The AKP's claim of "democratic opening" loses credibility in recent years as the PKK's alternative narrative gains prominence.

Keywords Kurds · Turkey · Kurdish question · Ethnic reforms · Framing

In September 2013, Turkish government declared a "democratization package" including new constitutional amendments that targeted some barriers to the use of the Kurdish language. Accordingly, private schools that provide education in the mother tongue were endorsed. Moreover, the amendment allowed political parties to use "other languages" (that is, Kurdish) in their political campaigns. The democratization package also included recognition of the right to claim local (original) village names (Jongerden 2009).[1]

[1]For the democratization package in detail, see "Başbakan Erdoğan Demokratikleşme Paketini Açıkladı." Radikal September 30, 2013. The pro-Kurdish DTP's proposal for village names, an amendment to Law 5442, was dated back to April, 20, 2008. For details, see Jongerden (2009).

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Why were these reforms, coupled with several preceding reform packages, not effective in curbing the growing dissent among Turkey's Kurds? We argue that the actual content of reforms is not so significant; what really matters, instead, is the public perception of reforms on both sides, Turkish and Kurdish. The AKP's discourse of "democratic opening" is losing credibility in recent years, whereas the PKK's alternative narrative has gained prominence. When recognition of Kurdish cultural rights is framed as a "gift" or as an "appeasement measure" by the Turkish state, the PKK's master frame of violence gains strong support within the Kurdish polity. On the contrary, when the reforms are held in a frame that emphasizes "democratization" and "egalitarian humanism," the PKK's framing becomes less convincing.

An analysis of framing processes sheds light on the current negotiations between the Turkish government and the PKK. First, the issue of pro-Kurdish reforms has become a symbolic battlefield as a part of identity politics and thus has lost its expected value within both Turkish and Kurdish constituencies. Second, as the AKP government has become more authoritarian, bilateral trust has faded in the face of uncertainty about the near future. Both moral and strategic logic highlight the importance of a "democratization and human rights" master frame, suggesting that the AKP government will not regain a strong hand in the peace negotiations unless it goes back to the democracy track.

Turkey's Kurdish opening: a brief overview

In 2009, the Turkish government took a major step by introducing the "Democratic Opening," popularly referred to as the "Kurdish Opening." The then interior minister Beşir Atalay and other officials paid exclusive visits to every single city in Turkey in order to explain the government's initiative. Meanwhile, Erdoğan pushed the opposition parliamentarians to support the opening by playing the card of "Ataturk's pluralist parliament structure" (*Hurriyet Daily News* 2009). The initial reaction of major opposition parties, CHP and MHP, however, was furious.

Earlier, as part of the European Union membership negotiations, the AKP government had introduced reform packages that expanded Kurdish cultural rights. By 2004, for the first time in modern Turkish history, the ban on the use of Kurdish in speech, publications, and broadcasting ended. In addition to reforms of cultural rights, the EU membership reforms included the abolition of the state security courts, reforms to ensure civilian control over the National Security Council, the abolition of the death penalty, and most importantly, the eradication of the Emergency Rule Law in the Southeast (Watts 2010:88–89).

These initial reforms, however, were restrictive. For example, private TV and radio stations were not allowed to broadcast in Kurdish as late as December 2005. Moreover, these private channels were allowed only forty-five minutes a day of Kurdish broadcasting. Such restrictions were eliminated after the formation of the TRT Şeş, the official Kurdish TV channel, in 2009. Likewise, teaching Kurdish in universities remained illegal until the Opening in 2009.

Contemporaneous with the Kurdish Opening, the government pursued secret negotiations with the PKK (known as the Oslo Process) that were later publicized by the AKP government. As a part of the negotiations, on October 19, 2009, eight unarmed but uniformed PKK militants crossed from Iraq into Turkey through the Habur border

gate with the consent of Turkish authorities. These PKK members, who would normally have been captured if not killed, were given amnesty and allowed to march freely to Diyarbakır and were welcomed by a cheering crowd. Perceived as a "terrorist show," the Habur incident triggered public outrage, and the government halted the process (Akyol 2013). A few weeks later, the Constitutional Court decreed the closure of the pro-Kurdish DTP (in November 2009) despite the fact that the DTP had won a clear victory in the March 2009 local elections. This development marked the end of the Opening, followed by mass arrests of pro-Kurdish activists (Gürses 2010).

Several years later, the AKP government resumed talks with the PKK. "Silence the weapons and let the ideas and politics speak," said the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in his historic call to guerilla commanders in March 2013. After Öcalan's letter, armed PKK members began to withdraw from Turkey, entering Northern Iraq. In July 2014, the process—popularly referred to as the "Peace Process"—was made into law in the Official Gazette with the title "Bringing an End to Terror and Strengthening Social Unification" (Official Gazette 2014). Following the critical June 2015 elections that declared the pro-Kurdish HDP's victory and the AKP's defeat, violence erupted on the streets again. Both the government and the PKK declared the end of the "Peace Process." Emboldened by the formation of Kurdish cantons in northern Syria thanks to US support to People's Protection Units (YPG), the PKK called Kurdish youth for an "urban warfare" in Southeast Turkey. The year 2016 was recorded as the bloodiest since mid-1990s: More than five thousand militants were deceased, thousands of Kurdish political activists including leading MPs of pro-Kurdish party (HDP) were imprisoned, and about a thousand security personnel and civilians lost their lives (Yanmış 2016).[2]

Democratization and ethnic peace: a murky relationship

The literature on the relationship between democratic reforms and ethno-political settlement is vast. If we focus solely on the implications of possible Kurdish regional arrangements in a form of federalism—what is popularly called "democratic autonomy" by the pro-Kurdish party in the Turkish Parliament—comparative cases provide few clues due to the complex nature of the issue. Some scholars consider federalism a solution to conflicts based on nationalism by granting greater autonomy to minorities, whereas others argue that it intensifies separatist violence instead as mobilization against the government will be more resourceful (Brass 1991; Gurr 2000; Hechter 2000; Roeder 1991; Bunce 1999; Brubaker 1996; Treisman 1997; Laitin 1998; Snyder 2000).[3]

Riker and Hechter suggest that federalism as a bargain between center and periphery creates an environment in which leaders of central governments are perceived to be losing ground, especially when the periphery gains more resources. As a result, political disputes between center and periphery inflame separatist nationalism (Riker 1964:169; Hechter 1992:256). Similarly, Hale argues that parts of a federation that have the

[2] For a rare survey on Kurdish public opinion of the derailment of the peace process and ensuing urban warfare, see Yanmış (2016).

[3] Scholars who analyze large-N data tend to support the first view.

greatest resources are often first in leading separatist nationalism (Hale 2000). The opposite argument, however, is also well documented: separatist violence is more likely to be seen in less developed regions of the centralized regimes (Horowitz 1985). A social movement perspective may combine both: while separatist nationalism "emerges" in less developed regions, it "develops" through resource mobilization in a comparatively wealthy region. Then the question is if a more autonomous Kurdish region, bolstered by democratic reforms in Turkey, would lead to a decrease in secessionist violence.

Assessing comparative cases around the globe, Lustick, Miodownik, and Eidelson (2004) designed a virtual country, Beita, to explore how institutional frameworks determine identitarian movements such as ethno-political mobilization, secessionist activity, and secession. Their findings show that in the short term, state repression suppresses ethno-political mobilizations. However, it does not reduce the threat of secession. Power-sharing such as in federalism, on the other hand, tends to be more effective in reducing secessionist activities, but it encourages ethnic minority movements.

Few scholars have pointed out the need to classify countries based on the strength of their democracies. Illiberal democracies and countries in transition are especially vulnerable. Examining the cases of Kosovo, Macedonia, and Bulgaria, Maria Koinova (2009) concludes that ethno-political violence is more likely to be observed in transitional periods. Koinova shows how these countries utilized strategies of coercion or co-optation to grant minorities' demands through state institutions, covert activities, or a combination of both, as well as how the degree of violence is dependent on the timely response of governments to the demands of minorities. In a similar vein, Yalcin Mousseau (2001:547) states that political violence and democracy can be depicted as an inverted U-curve in ethnically heterogeneous societies. Democracy suppresses conflict, whereas conflict is more likely to be observed in transitional democracies compared to autocratic regimes.

The murky relationship between democratization reforms and ethnic violence has led some scholars to regard each case in its specific context. According to Timur Kuran's (1998) ethnification perspective, for example, similarly developed societies may show very different levels of ethnic activity, and thus, the threat of secessionist violence varies widely. Ethno-political reforms per se may have no direct effect on separatist violence because it [the violence] is subject to a host of non-institutional contingencies such as "reputational cascade," which is "a self-reinforcing process by which people motivated to protect and enhance their reputations induce each other to step up their ethnic activities" (Kuran 1998: 623). Drawing mostly from the case of Yugoslavia, Kuran explores the link between social norms and ethno-political order. "However long a society remains in a state of low ethnic activity," argues Kuran (1998: 647), "once the forces sustaining that equilibrium are overcome, its transition to an equilibrium featuring high ethnic activity can occur without further shocks, simply through individual adjustments and readjustments to evolving ethnic norms".

Kuran's (1998) notion of "ethnification" brings skepticism about democratization reforms that aim to ameliorate root causes. Public perceptions are quite independent from the root causes that generate the original conflict. According to Kuran (1998: 647), "having displayed low ethnic activity for decades, the society may reach a stage where ethnicity enters a vast array of decisions, from leisure and dress to residential

location and political affiliation".[4] Such developments trigger threat perceptions ("we" vs. "other") because "individuals who got along well with ethnic outsiders may suddenly start articulating ethnic grievances and signaling interethnic mistrust in order to obtain reputational benefits reserved for the ethnically mobilized." In other words, "the fears and antagonisms that accompany high levels of ethnic activity may be a result of ethnification rather than its root cause" (Kuran 1998:648).

Thus, the ethnification perspective puts special emphasis on perceptions and mistrust among ethnic communities. Expansion of local authority for pro-Kurdish municipalities may be seen as a democratic reform for Kurds, but the very act may be interpreted as threatening for the Turkish majority, triggering Turkish nationalist sentiments at large. Moreover, these processes are bound to economic conditions and the political stability of the country at a given time. The case of Yugoslavia, perhaps, is the best example of the role of public identity perceptions and cognitive framing in ethnic politics. As Anthony Oberschall (2000:989) notes,

> Yugoslavs experienced ethnic relations through two frames: a normal frame and a crisis frame. People possessed both frames in their minds: in peaceful times the crisis frame was dormant, and in crisis and war the normal frame was suppressed. Both frames were anchored in private and family experiences, in culture, and in public life. In the normal frame, which prevailed in Tito's Yugoslavia, ethnic relations were cooperative and neighborly. Colleagues, workers, schoolmates, and teammates transacted routinely across nationalities. Some did not even know or bother to know another's nationality. Intermarriage was accepted. Holidays were spent in each other's republics. Except in Kosovo, the normal frame prevailed for most Yugoslavs throughout the 1980s. The crisis frame was grounded in the experiences and memories of the Balkan wars, the first and second world wars – and other wars before that. In these crises, there was no distinction between civilians and combatants. Old people, children, women, priests – no one was spared. Atrocities, massacres, torture, ethnic cleansing, and a scorched-earth policy were the rule. Everyone was held collectively responsible for their nationality and religion and became targets of revenge and reprisals.

The peace process Alla Turca

Whether it is a land reform that was suggested in the 1960s or an expansion of local autonomy (yerel yönetim), suggestions for reforms on the Kurdish issue are well entrenched in Turkish politics, going far back to the early years of Turkish Republic. Especially after the "Kurdish Opening" or the "Democratic Opening" in 2009, it has

[4] In the most extreme cases, in-group rewards or punishments may be severe to the extent that an individual cannot possibly escape polarization. In the words of a Serbian taxi driver: 'No one wanted the coming war, but if I don't fight, someone from my side [Serb] will kill me, and if my Muslim friends don't fight, other Muslims will kill them' (Oberschall 2000:996).

become the fashion to suggest to the Turkish government a checklist of reforms. What is often omitted, however, is the debate over methods to introduce ethno-political reforms.

The peace talks between the AKP government and the PKK go back to secret Oslo meetings in 2009, then popularly known as the "Oslo Process." The meetings included PKK representatives, some members of the Kurdish diaspora, and Turkish officials. The process did not last long, and both the AKP and the PKK blamed each other for the collapse in mid-2011 when the meetings were revealed to the public. The outcome was too bloody (Tezcür 2013).

Soon after, the AKP government initiated a new campaign by reaching out to the jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. Kurdish Newroz (New Year celebrations) in March 2013 marked the beginning of a new era of yet another ceasefire, often referred to as the "Peace Process." Since then, the AKP has passed a new law that enables formal peace talks with the PKK guerillas, and then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan further declared his plans to devolve some local powers to Kurdish provinces. Pro-government media also began to publish a positive image of the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, suggesting a presidential pardon for him. This close alliance was interpreted as a silent negotiation over Erdoğan's presidency and it increased skepticism within the Turkish constituency.

Skepticism and bilateral mistrust appear to be fundamental flaws in the peace process. The pro-Kurdish party (HDP) leader Selahattin Demirtaş has stated that it is not realistic to expect conflict resolution with the current AKP leadership even if negotiations were to carry on for fifty years (*Cumhuriyet* 2015). Under such circumstances, any introduction of new reforms is interpreted in a variety of ways, often in conflict with one another. To grasp the perception of the public at large, it is significant to analyze competing narratives that have dominated everyday conversations in the past few years. Based on our observations, we have identified four major competing frames in public discourse, namely the PKK frame, the Turkish nationalist frame, the democratization frame, and the critical frame.

Frames are collective lenses to interpret the social world by situating and connecting events and social action in a meaningful narrative (Snow et al. 1986). Erving Goffman defines frames as "schemata of interpretation" that enable individuals "to locate, perceive, identify, and label" occurrences in their everyday lives as well as in the social world at large (Goffman 1974:21). By making events or occurrences meaningful, frames enable individuals "to organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective" (Snow et al. 1986:3264).

The PKK frame

In the PKK's framing, recognition of the Kurdish identity, pro-Kurdish reforms, and increased socio-cultural rights are products of "the independence war" waged by the PKK for three decades. "How could we trust the AKP government given the fact that all these (reforms) are not protected by the constitution?" asks a pro-Kurdish activist "What if they change their minds later?" (Kurdi-DER Representative, personal communication, July 9, 2009).

Although the PKK and the pro-Kurdish political parties are independent in terms of their organizational structures, the majority of the Kurdish parties' members have maintained their close relationship with the PKK because a significant portion of their

constituency has voted for their party as a surrogate PKK (Watts 2006). One of the co-authors' interviews with Kurdish party deputies in the Turkish Grand National Assembly in Ankara, along with observations of some deputies' speeches in Diyarbakır public demonstrations, present two different discourses concerning the PKK. In Ankara, they argue that the state should strategically recognize the PKK in order to achieve peace and democracy in the region; whereas in Diyarbakır, they cherish the PKK's fight and claim that the PKK deserves to be taken into account due to their unyielding struggle.

Thus, the PKK frame utilizes mistrust and insecurity among pro-Kurdish constituencies and narrates its past insurgent violence as a legitimate resort when there is "no other way out" (Goodwin 2001).[5]

The Turkish nationalist frame

Most Turkish nationalists perceive the reforms as an outcome of weak governance. Such framing is especially popular among supporters of the MHP, the Nationalist Action Party, as well as the CHP, the Republican People's Party, in Turkey's western cities. Thus, recognition of Kurdish rights and pro-Kurdish reforms is the result of strategic miscalculations by the AKP government, if not the AKP elite's outright treachery.

According to research conducted in Marmara region in the early days of the "Kurdish Opening," for example, 83 % of respondents thought that the AKP failed to manage the issue properly and 70 % believed that Turkish and Kurdish nationalism deepened after the "Opening" (Vatan 2009).[6]

This frame, ironically, is compatible with the PKK frame to a certain extent: the action of the PKK to arm its members is seen as the main factor in the subsequent introduction of reforms. In both frames, there is no denunciation of violence; instead there is an assumption that violence (from either the Turkish or Kurdish side) could bring peace.

The democratization frame

For a long-term peace, both Turkish and Kurdish constituencies need to be convinced that pro-Kurdish reforms are a reflection of a larger genuine trend in which democratic peaceful norms replace past violent engagements in Turkey. Such a belief in conflict transformation will shape all parties' interests and optimism for the future and thus reinforce the peace process. Moreover, it appears to be the most powerful frame that could make pro-Kurdish reforms sustainable and effective. Perhaps that's why the AKP government replaced the name "Kurdish Opening" with "Democratic Opening" in 2009, and later framed it as "the national unity project" (Çandar 2009).

The AKP's democratization frame was most convincing when the government took steps in relation to the European Union membership regulations. Between 2001 and 2004, several EU harmonization packages were introduced, and they have significantly diminished the Turkish military's dominant position in defining the Kurdish issue.

[5] On collective psychology of insurgent groups, See Goodwin (2001).

[6] The poll was conducted by AKAM. The poll also indicated that 69% of the population is not supportive of the process; 78% believes that the Turks and the Kurds became more alienated from one another; and 70% does not believe that the terror problem will end. For details, see Vatan (2009).

These reforms included the abolition of the state security courts, reforms to ensure civilian control over the National Security Council, the abolition of the death penalty, and most importantly, the eradication of the Emergency Rule Law in the Southeast (Gürbüz 2015). Given the fact that such significant steps were taken at a time when the Turkish military's tutelage over politics remained strong, we can infer that EU-induced democratization framing was successful in keeping both Turkish and Kurdish constituencies satisfied.

In recent years, however, the AKP's authoritarian drift away from the EU path makes democratization framing less convincing in both constituencies. An especially worrisome development was the government's granting of extraordinary powers to the Turkish national intelligence agency (MİT), via what is popularly known as "the MİT law" that came into effect in 2014. Specifically, the MİT law brought protection for MİT agents who infiltrate "terrorist" organizations will have no criminal liability for crimes committed while undercover. For Kurds, such measures are reminiscent of the military regime in the Kurdish-populated Southeast during 1990s (Akyol 2014).[7]

The critical frame

An alternative frame puts the AKP government's pragmatism at the forefront: in their fight against Turkey's secularist elite, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the AKP utilized the EU process and democratization reform packages to gain power and leverage. In this framing, the AKP prioritizes the party's interest to win regarding Kurdish issues, and thus Erdoğan consciously neglects the process in accordance with the short-term pragmatic policies of the AKP.

This critical framing resonates with those individuals who do not subscribe to any of the three frames mentioned above, finding narratives of all the major political players (AKP, MHP/CHP, and HDP) problematic. Such a perspective, however, invites cynicism and draws a bleak picture as the AKP government experiences crises within and its short-term calculations make it harder to agree long-term policies for peace in Turkey.

In what follows, we suggest that pro-ethnic reforms may be introduced in an all-inclusive perspective through an emphasis on human suffering and thus could pave the way towards "de-ethnification."

De-ethnification: utilizing frames for building mutual trust

In the early days of the "Kurdish Opening," human suffering was a powerful approach to framing the need for peace talks. "Let mothers not cry anymore!" had become the central discursive anchor on both sides of the conflict. Then Prime Minister Recep

[7] The new law enables MİT to conduct operations without fearing serious judicial oversight. With this law, MİT now have unfettered access to the archives and databases of every ministry and are able to collect any data on citizens. Moreover, the law requires private companies to hand over consumer data and technical equipment to MİT when requested. Critics argue that the law is apparently against Article 20 of the Turkish Constitution that protects the privacy of citizens. See, Akyol (2014).

Tayyip Erdoğan met with a group of afflicted Kurdish mothers, popularly known as "Saturday mothers," in his office, promising that the government would help find the perpetrators of the violence and bring them to justice. Reminiscent of the Mothers of the Disappeared in Argentina (Kurtz 2010),[8] most "Saturday mothers" lost their children during the martial law era when the Turkish armed forces frequently interrogated alleged PKK sympathizers in the region.

The AKP government, however, could not successfully build on the symbolism of "mothers" in reframing the conflict in humane ways, thus planting seeds for "de-ethnification." Images of mothers and public representations of mothers could have been utilized to unite Turks and Kurds against a common enemy, i.e. abusive militarism, while the reforms were introduced to the larger public. Despite not having a reform component, hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) may serve as an inspiration for collective rituals that can connect Turkish and Kurdish communities.

As Tanya Goodman argues, the hearings of the TRC generated a sense of Durkheimian "collective effervescence" and what Victor Turner famously called "communitas." (Goodman 2006).[9] This public imagery was a framing process to redefine the militarism of the past and a democratic future. It was a transition, in the words of Archbishop Tutu, "from repression, from evil, from ghastliness to democracy and freedom" (Goodman 2006:172).[10]

The AKP government could have opened up social platforms for all suffering mothers— mothers of Turkish and Kurdish soldiers as well as mothers of Turkish and Kurdish guerillas —to share their stories in public. When introducing the pro-Kurdish reforms, the government's emphasis on "the rule of law" could have been strengthened so both Turkish and Kurdish constituencies could relate to each other's suffering through empathy. The following account of a white Afrikaans poet who reported on the proceedings of the TRC indicates how emotional attachment and trust began to emerge through such public rituals:

> It's not about skin color, culture, language, but about people. The personal pain puts an end to all stereotypes, where we connect now has nothing to do with group or color, we connect with our humanity (Goodman 2006:175).[11]

In the absence of such consistent bilateral framing, however, suffering mothers have often been claimed by the Kurdish activists unilaterally, as "mothers versus the state." For example, the pro-Kurdish party erected a statue of a grieving Kurdish mother under attack in memory of the Roboski incident—when Turkish jets fired on a group of Kurdish smugglers and killed thirty-four civilians, acting on information that PKK militants were crossing the border—. At the opening ceremony for the monument,

[8] For details of the Argentina case, see Kurtz (2010).
[9] See also, respectively, Durkheim (1995); Turner (1977).
[10] D. Tutu, "South Africa's Human Spirit: An Oral Memoir of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission," http://www.sabctruth.co.za/index.htm (2000) Quoted in Goodman (2006: 172).
[11] A. Krog, Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa (Johannesburg: Random House, 1998), 45; Quoted in Goodman (2006:175).

Kurdish women emphasized that "poor mothers are still crying" due to military operations (Gürbüz 2016:101).

Another noteworthy attempt to build mutual civic trust was the AKP government's formation of Wise People's Commission (Akil İnsanlar Heyeti) in April 2013. The government selected 62 members on board including academics, artists, writers, journalists, community leaders, and leading members of the civil society associations (Çıtak and Alkan 2015:88). The commission's goals were described as (a) explaining the peace process to the public (b) learning public expectations and demands (regarding the process) and (c) developing a mutual empathy in the country. Given the strong tradition Turkish state-centrism, the initiative was a rare call for the civil society. "For the first time in our history, the state asks the opinion of its citizen" said a Commission member, "If we listen them carefully, I think, we will get more effective outcomes than lecturing them" (Kızılkaya 2014:25).

In Kurdish populated Eastern Anatolia only, the Commission members talked to thousands of people from all walks of life (Table 1). Similar meetings occurred across the country for three months period and the Commission prepared a final report for the government.

Two-month long activities of the Commission played a bridge role between the government and the voices of civil society. The process, however, suffered from a lack of "framing." The commission members were often criticized for being "AKP lackey," and thus, their activities were perceived as state propaganda. The Commission submitted their final report in June 2013, and yet, the government refused to share the report with the media. Such attitude was counterproductive.

A better framing could have helped in advancing the Commission's influence in peace-making and building a mutual trust among Turkish and Kurdish communities. The Commission did not play a role in bridging the gap between Turkish and Kurdish civic platforms; instead, it worked as a channel to bridge the government and a divided public at large. In this sense, the process was too state-centered. As a result, the

Table 1 Major activities of the Commission for the Eastern Anatolia Region

Activities	Number of occasions	Number of participants (total)
Meetings with civil society Organizations	15	7200
University campus meetings	13	4100
Visits to shopkeepers	9	370
Visits to families	12	55
Conversations in coffee/tea houses	7	540
Visits to villages	5	750
Visits to neighborhood associations	4	40
Visits to sheikhs and neighborhood leaders	16	16
Visits to Alevi centers	4	600
Conversations after Friday prayers	5	600
May 1 celebrations in Tunceli (all commission members participated)	1	1500
Welcoming ceremonies	5	950
Funeral visits	2	200

Adapted from Çıtak and Alkan (2015)

Commission's Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood/sisterhood discourse was not very powerful when the civil society organizations were raising their voice to be heard by the government. In other words, the involved parties were simply trying to keep their interests in a policy realm, instead of communicating with the other side with a genuine heart. The Commission's brotherhood language was not supported by emotional repertoires that could "de-ethnify" Turkish-Kurdish boundaries.

Concluding remarks

The peace process in Turkey is largely shaped by interpretations of the AKP government's policies—seen as dangerous compromises by Turkish nationalists and as PKK victories by Kurdish nationalists. President Erdogan's growing authoritarianism has led to both Turkish and Kurdish nationalist frames gaining prominence in recent years. Despite many reforms that have helped to develop official recognition of Kurdish identity over the past decade, tension between Turks and Kurds has steadily increased. In fact, level of mistrust between these ethnic groups is remarkably high than ever before in modern Turkish history.

To grasp the complex nature of the puzzle, the literature on "ethnification" is useful. In ethnic conflict, interests are shaped by images that in turn are partly shaped by identity. Such in-group versus out-group identity narratives—self vs. other—are reproduced by frames or image- making, and when the status quo of the dominant ethnic regime is challenged, the process of "ethnification" occurs in which Turkish or Kurdish identities develop in a symbiotic antagonism (Kadioglu and Keyman 2011).

As "ethnification" is a social construction, so is "de-ethnification." In their seminal work on conflict resolution, Winslade and Monk criticize the classic paradigm that calls on mediators to discover the truth by examining "the root causes of conflicts." The authors, instead, call for "narrative mediation" that focuses on discursive framing. "We believe our job as mediators is not so much to empower them, in the sense of spooning out dollops of our own power," argue Winslade and Monk, "as it is to treat them as capable of writing and rewriting at least parts of their own scripts" (Winslade and Monk 2008:284–285).

Turkish government's ethnic reforms could have proved to be more influential if the AKP government's narrative were presented in human-rights language. As Sara Cobb suggests, "better-formed stories" and successful frames enable "the compassion of one side for the Other." Therefore, stories of Kurdish suffering need to be supported by a special emphasis on "equality" based on democratic rights. Introduction of ethnic reforms with egalitarian humanism would invite compassion in the two sides of the aisle, not pity for poor Kurds in the eyes of Turkish majority because "pity is forestalled when the humanity of both/all sides of a conflict are fully humanized" (Cobb 2013: 225). In the words of Hannah Arendt, "For compassion, to be stricken with the suffering of someone else as though it were contagious, and pity, to be sorry without being touched in the flesh, is not only not the same, they may not even be related" (Cobb 2013:224).[12]

[12] J. Elshtain, "Hannah Arendt's French Revolution," Salmagundi 84 (1989), 210; Quoted in Cobb (2013:224).

Acknowledgments The authors thank participants of *The Colloquium on the Transformation of Turkey* organized by the International Institute of Islamic Thought in December 2014. An earlier version of this essay was also presented at Colgate University on Feb. 26, 2015.

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