



Sanjarbek HABIBJONOV^a 

^a*Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies
2nd-year student, "International Relations"*

THE KURDISH FACTOR IN TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY

Abstract. *This article analyzes the historical, political, and geopolitical place of the Kurdish factor in Turkey's foreign policy. Covering the period from the Ottoman era to the present day, it examines the Treaty of Lausanne, the emergence of the PKK, the Adana Protocol (1998), and Ankara's policy toward the Kurdish structures in Syria and Iraq. The Kurdish factor is analyzed, on the basis of the theories of "dual-track diplomacy" and "securitization," as simultaneously a security threat to Turkey and an important diplomatic-economic instrument. It is shown that Turkey actively uses this factor to pursue its strategic aims at the regional and international levels.*

Keywords: *transnational ethnic group, Erol Kurubaş, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), People's Protection Units (YPG), Adana Protocol, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Azadi movement, Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).*

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, ethnic and religious factors have become one of the most important components of international relations in the Middle East. Among these processes, the Kurdish question has come to occupy a central place both in Turkey's foreign policy and in its domestic political and security agenda. The Kurds, who are the largest ethnic minority in Turkey by number, exert a direct influence on the country's political stability, regional security, and foreign-policy orientations. In particular, the Kurdish political structures in Syria and Iraq and their aspiration toward autonomy and independence have become an important geopolitical problem for Turkish foreign policy. Densely settled across the territories of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, the Kurds, as a "transnational ethnic group," are the clearest example of the political consequences that flow from the relative artificiality of the region's borders. As Professor Erol Kurubaş has emphasized, the

Kurdish problem has been a factor that significantly affects the general outlook, internal dynamics, and bilateral relations of Turkish foreign policy (Kurubaş, 2009).

Uniting some 35–40 million people worldwide, the Kurds are considered one of the largest peoples without a state of their own, and their problem today remains as acute and as unresolved as it was a hundred years ago. Turkey occupies a special place in this matter. First, the largest Kurdish population in the world lives in south-eastern Turkey (approximately 47–54 percent of all Kurds, that is, close to 15 million people, live in Turkey). Second, Turkey, as a NATO member deeply integrated with the West, stands under great international pressure in resolving this question. Third, Turkey has shaped its Kurdish policy not merely within the framework of domestic policy but as an inseparable, priority direction of its foreign policy – and this greatly complicates the situation.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODS

The scholarly literature on the topic covers several directions. While Professor Erol Kurubaş analyzes the Kurdish question as a structural factor affecting Turkey's foreign policy, the monograph of the orientalist Fotima Nazarova (2024) studies the question comparatively at the intersection of Turkish and Iranian foreign policy. Materials of the Washington Institute, the Encyclopaedia Britannica, and international media document PKK activity, the Adana Protocol, and the tensions within NATO. The existing literature tends to consider the Kurdish question one-sidedly, from the standpoint either of security or of ethnic rights.

Using the historical-analytical method, the period from the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres to 2025 was studied in sequence, and the stages in Turkey's Kurdish policy were identified. On the basis of content analysis, the statements of Turkish officials, international diplomatic documents, and political programs were examined. Through comparative policy analysis, the similar and different aspects of the Kurdish factor in Turkey's relations with Syria, Iraq, and Iran were determined. Within the conceptual analysis, the theory of “securitization” and the concept of “dual-track diplomacy” were used as the principal methods.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Kurdish factor in Turkey's foreign policy is a complex, many-sided, and strategically significant factor that must be assessed not only as a “security threat” but also as

an instrument actively employed at the regional and international levels. First, historical analysis confirmed that, from the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) to the present day, Turkey has used the Kurdish question as a mechanism linking domestic and foreign policy. Ankara manages this factor through dual-track diplomacy: on the one hand, designating the PKK and the YPG as terrorist organizations and justifying military operations against them (“Olive Branch,” “Peace Spring,” “Claw-Sword,” and others) by the need to ensure internal security and regional stability; on the other hand, developing constructive cooperation with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq in energy, trade, and infrastructure, thereby strengthening its economic and geopolitical influence.

A second important result is the role of the Kurdish factor as a diplomatic lever for Turkey. In blocking the membership of Sweden and Finland within NATO, in gaining the upper hand in negotiations with the United States over the F-16 issue, and in maintaining a balance with Russia on the Syrian question, the Kurdish factor became a significant political instrument for Ankara. This situation demonstrates the successful application of the “securitization” strategy: by presenting its actions within the framework of “legitimate security concerns,” Turkey achieves recognition by part of the international community (especially the United States and NATO). Third, the research revealed the transnational character of the Kurdish factor in relations between Turkey and its neighbouring states (Syria, Iraq, Iran). The Adana Protocol (1998) is an important example of success in this regard, by which Turkey was for the first time able to raise the Kurdish question to the level of a diplomatic document imposing binding demands on another state. At the same time, during the Syrian crisis the YPG question has remained the most serious source of conflict in Turkey–US relations. Rather than passively “managing” the Kurdish factor, Turkey uses it as an active strategic resource that has become a central factor determining not only the country’s national security but also its geopolitical standing in the region, its position within NATO, and its economic interests. The results confirm that, in the near future too, the Kurdish question will remain a priority direction of Ankara’s foreign policy.

The geopolitical situation in the Middle East

Studying the Kurdish factor in Turkey’s foreign policy means having in view several closely interconnected problems. The first is the Syrian question. In the crisis that began in Syria in 2011 and continues to this day, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and their principal armed component, the YPG (People’s Protection Units), entered the

struggle against ISIS in cooperation with the United States. From Ankara's point of view, however, the YPG was the direct continuation of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), which is designated a terrorist organization in Turkey. This situation aroused a mood of coldness in relations between the two states. The second is Iraqi Kurdistan. Turkey sought to cooperate with the Erbil-based Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) on the basis of mutual interests, establishing constructive relations in energy, trade, and diplomacy; yet at the same time it carried out continuous military operations against the PKK in northern Iraq. The contradiction between these two directions clearly expresses one of the strategic dilemmas of Turkish foreign policy. The third is relations with Iran. Iran, as a state that also faces a Kurdish question on its own territory, shares certain common interests with Turkey in this regard; but at the same time the two states pursue conflicting geopolitical aims in Syria and Iraq, which turns their cooperation into a delicate process full of contradiction.

Tensions between Turkey and Iran in influencing the Kurds

In her monograph on the Kurdish factor in the foreign policy of Turkey and Iran, the orientalist Fotima Nazarova explains the relevance of the Kurdish question as follows: "First of all, the subject itself continues as a living, moving process. Turkey's operations in northern Syria – 'Olive Branch' (2018), 'Peace Spring' (2019), and 'Claw-Sword' (2022) – were assessed as a direct threat to regional stability and gave rise to wide debate in the international community" (Nazarova, 2024:60-128). Although these operations were explained as a security measure against the PKK, in practice they were carried out in areas inhabited by the civilian population and were widely criticized as a humanitarian tragedy. Moreover, Turkey's linking of the admission of Sweden and Finland to NATO to those countries' attitude toward persons and organizations connected with the PKK is the most recent and concrete example of how far this subject has spread onto the international stage.

The Kurdish question has, over the past decades, been the principal source of political instability and violence in Turkey. In addition, it acquires a multidimensional character from the standpoint of Turkey's EU-membership candidacy, its NATO membership, and its traditional relations with the United States. Turkey's security-oriented foreign policy of the 1990s changed sharply in the 2000s and moved toward a softer direction, sometimes called the "Europeanization of Turkish foreign policy." But in the 2010s it returned to the use of hard power. This three-stage change – hardness, softening, and

hardness again – is in turn directly connected with the role the Kurdish question has played in Turkish foreign policy.

As regards Turkey's policy toward Iraq, the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and the subsequent reshaping of the Iraqi state institutionalized Kurdish autonomy. Iraq's 2005 constitution granted federal status to the Erbil-based Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). This alarmed Turkish officials, who feared that such a designation might lead to full Kurdish sovereignty (Cagaptay, 2017). Turkey used the Kurdish factor toward Iraq along two parallel lines: on the one hand, military pressure (strikes against PKK bases), and on the other, economic access and cooperation (oil and trade with the KRG). Though this appears paradoxical, in practice it has its own logic.

Threats and opportunities connected with the Kurds: the first threat – the armed activity of the PKK has, since 1984, claimed about 40,000 lives in the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. Second, in 2013 Bashar al-Assad cleared Syria's northern border, in order to distract Turkey from its attempts to overthrow him; the YPG soon seized mainly Kurdish areas. The Turkish government openly declared that there was no difference between the Syrian YPG forces and the PKK, calling both terrorist organizations. The United States' belief that the YPG is not a terrorist organization has caused great tension between two NATO allies. Third, the PKK's main bases, logistical networks, and operational zones are located in the Qandil Mountains, the Sinjar district, and the border regions of northern Iraq. Any attempt by Ankara to resolve the PKK question through military operations or a political process inevitably involves Iraqi territory, which keeps Turkey in constant diplomatic disagreement with the Iraqi government and the KRG. Fourth, Turkey's attempts to exert influence on the Kurds in neighbouring territories also damage its international image.

Nevertheless, the Kurds also offer Turkey several opportunities. For example, the federal region of "landlocked Kurdistan" is seen as weak and as having no choice but to rely on Turkey. For several reasons Turkey is more useful to the KRG than Baghdad or Tehran, because it serves as a transit country for Kurdish oil and gas. Second, the admission of new members to NATO requires unanimous support, and this reality compelled Stockholm and Helsinki to take Ankara's concerns seriously. Among the main issues in Turkish-US diplomatic dialogue is Ankara's request to purchase new F-16 fighter jets from Washington and to modernize its existing fleet; Turkey gained the upper hand in difficult negotiations with the United States on this matter. Third, Erdoğan succeeded in

strengthening his international position by securing Russia's support – particularly in key economic sectors such as energy and tourism – in exchange for assisting Putin in Syria.

Turkey's principal method of using the Kurdish threat is to justify external actions as a need of internal security. In 2018 the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, wrote: "Operation Olive Branch is an act of self-defence against a gathering of terrorists who had become aggressive toward our population centres. The positioning of PKK and YPG terrorists along our border served two purposes: opening an additional front of PKK terrorist operations beyond that in northern Iraq, and building their own state upon the remnants of Syria and Iraq" (Çavuşoğlu, 2018). This statement shows the diplomatic framing of the military operation: not only a struggle against the PKK, but the defence of regional stability and territorial integrity. In 2018 the US Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, noted: "Turkey is the only NATO member with an active armed insurgency inside its borders," and that it has "legitimate security concerns" (Dewan, 2018). This statement carries great diplomatic value for Turkey, because such recognition, coming from the most senior US military leader, lends legitimacy within NATO to Ankara's actions against Kurdish groups.

Kurdistan: the historical roots

If we turn to the historical roots of the Kurdish question and of a "Kurdistan" state, then, according to the records of the historian Xenophon, the Karduchoi (Carduchi) are considered the earliest ancestors of the present-day Kurds. They were nomadic tribes who, in the 4th century BCE, lived along the shores of the Black Sea. The term "Kurdistan" appeared in the 12th century during the Seljuk era. It was not invented by the Kurds; rather, it arose during the reign of Sultan Sanjar (the Seljuk Sanjar, 1118–1157 CE). He separated off the western part of the mountainous region, turned it into a separate state under the rule of his kinsman (Sulayman Shah), and named it Kurdistan; this state included Azerbaijan and Luristan (the provinces of Sanah and Dinawar), Hamadan, Kermanshah (in Iran), and western territories of the Zagros Mountains, among them the lands between Shahrazur and Koy Sanjak in Iraqi Kurdistan. Twelve years after the fall of the Seljuks, the Kurdish dynasty founded by the famous Saladin – the Ayyubids (1169–1250) – took the leadership of the Muslim world into its hands until the Mongol invasion of the 13th century. In the 16th century the Kurds lived in the eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire and the western part of the Safavid state, and after the 1638 Treaty of "Qasr-i Shirin" they were formally divided in two. The placement of the Kurds

in the Middle East depended, until the end of the 19th century, on the mutual relations of these two states (Nazarova, 2024:22-128).

The post-Ottoman period

The end of the First World War and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire redrew the entire political map of the Middle East. In this process there was, for the Kurds too, a short but vital period of hope. The 1920 Treaty of Sèvres had a punitive character: it separated the Ottoman Empire from its Arab provinces and divided Anatolia into British, French, Italian, and Greek zones of influence. Articles 62, 63, and 64 of the Treaty of Sèvres set out a road map of autonomy for the Kurdish people and the possibility of attaining independence. For the first time in modern diplomatic history, the word “Kurdistan” appeared in an international treaty and gave legal recognition to Kurdish national aspirations (Explaining History, 2025). But this hope lived less than three years. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk rejected the Treaty of Sèvres; in 1923, through negotiations with the new Turkish government, it was replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne, in which no reference to a Kurdish homeland remained.

The Treaty of Lausanne legalized the geographical integrity of the new Turkish Republic and its unitary character. All the promises obtained from Atatürk were forgotten with this treaty. The multicultural and multi-ethnic Ottoman past was abandoned, and in its place a secular state based on Turkish nationalism was built. Thus Lausanne created a firm political ground for the Turkish state to pursue a Kurdish policy built on the denial of Kurdish ethnic identity. This was not merely a domestic matter. The Treaty of Lausanne, signed on 24 July 1923, ended with the division of Kurdistan among Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. This division fragmented the Kurdish people among four states and did not permit the formation of a single Kurdish state. The newly established states of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran adopted a policy of imposing a single dominant ethnic identity and language on their territories, adding to it punitive measures aimed at marginalizing the Kurds and other minorities (Mustafa, 2023).

In February–March 1925, an armed uprising was raised in south-eastern Anatolia, led by Sheikh Said with the support of the “Azadi” movement and local religious and tribal leaders. This was the first major uprising organized against the newly formed Republic of Turkey. Britain stood behind those who organized this uprising (Özoğlu, 2015). This was of strategic significance for Ankara. Presenting the Kurdish question not as an

internal ethnic problem but as a security threat exploited by external forces became the principal ideological shield of all Turkey's subsequent foreign policy.

In later times several Kurdish uprisings took place, for example: Ararat (1930) and Dersim (1937–1938). The suppression of the Dersim uprising was a personally proclaimed victory for Atatürk. After the Dersim uprising was crushed in 1938, Atatürk delivered the following speech: “We have not allowed, and will not allow, any opportunity that might prevent our nation from reaching the highest level of civilization and happiness it deserves.” This was a veiled message addressed to all forces that had opposed the “republican model” (Lahdili, 2018). In 1952 Turkey's accession to NATO added a new geopolitical dimension to the Kurdish question. Now, for Ankara, the Kurdish problem was no longer only a matter of internal security but a subject discussed within the framework of strategic partnership with the United States. During the Cold War, Turkey used the Kurdish question toward its Western allies in a two-fold manner: first, proving the necessity of keeping Kurdish groups under control against communist influence, it extracted military aid from the United States; second, it legitimized internal repression as a necessary measure to limit Soviet influence. After the 1980 military coup, the Kurdish language was officially banned in public and private life. Many who spoke, published, or sang in Kurdish were arrested and imprisoned; in this period the performance of the Kurdish language, culture, and folklore was forbidden in Turkey.

The activity of the PKK in Iraq and Syria

The PKK was founded on 27 November 1978 in the village of Ziyaret in the Fırs district. Its central committee, led by Abdullah Öcalan, consisted of seven persons. Having at first fought for an independent Kurdish state, in the 1990s the PKK changed its official platform to a struggle for autonomy and political-cultural rights within Turkey. Öcalan built networks that allowed PKK fighters to train with Palestinian groups in Syria and Lebanon and placed them in camps in the semi-autonomous Kurdish areas of northern Iraq. As soon as the PKK was founded, it created bases in the territories of Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. The Kurdish factor thus became a direct object of Turkish foreign policy (Thomas & Zanotti, 2025). The PKK, organized in the late 1970s by Kurdish leftists in Turkey, formally began a campaign of violence against the Turkish government in 1984. The rise of the PKK arose from Ankara's suppression of Kurdish culture and from the human-rights violations carried out against Turkey's Kurdish population.

From 1984 onward the PKK built bases in northern Iraq and launched an armed campaign against Turkey, frequently carrying out terrorist acts and guerrilla operations targeting government facilities, the military, Turks living in Turkey's Kurdish areas, Kurds accused of collaboration, foreigners, and Turkey's diplomatic missions. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, by 1993 the total number of security forces involved in the struggle in south-eastern Turkey reached approximately 200,000, and the conflict became the largest civil war in the Middle East. From 1982 to 1995, about 15,000 people were killed, most of them Kurdish civilians. In a 1992 operation about 20,000 Turkish soldiers entered safe areas in Iraq, and in 1995 some 35,000 soldiers took part in a similar campaign (Dewdney, 2026).

Hafez al-Assad gave shelter to PKK members for decades, and the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan lived in Damascus in the 1980s and 1990s. After the end of the Cold War, the Syrian government began to use the PKK as a bargaining card in negotiations with Turkey over water rights on the Euphrates. In the 1990s, relations between the two states sharpened when the Turkish government decided to build an enormous dam system on the Euphrates and the Tigris – rivers that flow through Syria and threatened harm to the country's agricultural regions. In response, the Syrian government intensified its aid and support to the PKK, the Kurdish separatist-Marxist group carrying out attacks in Turkey (Younes, 2019). This situation shows how complex Turkish foreign policy is: first, the fact that the PKK's headquarters were in Damascus served as Syria's instrument against Turkey; second, there were independent disagreements between Turkey and Syria over water resources, the border, and economic interests. The Kurdish factor bound these two bilateral conflicts closely together.

The 1998 Adana agreement came about as a result of the mediation efforts of Egypt and Iran, and satisfied the Turkish demands that Syria end its support for the PKK, declare it a "terrorist organization," and deport its leader Abdullah Öcalan from the country. The agreement was finally signed after the Iranian Foreign Minister Kemal Kharrazi and the Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa mediated on behalf of their presidents. Some call this agreement the Turkish-Syrian version of the Camp David accord signed between Egypt and Israel (Cengiz, 2025). This was the first time Turkey used the Kurdish factor in the form of a whole external diplomatic document, imposing obligations on another state to achieve its aim. Öcalan's arrest reveals much about the methods of

Turkish foreign policy: diplomatic and military pressure on Syria (1998), drawing Egypt and Iran in as mediators, the country-by-country pursuit of Öcalan (he fled to Russia, Greece, Italy, and Kenya), and finally his capture by Turkish national intelligence (MIT) in Nairobi, Kenya, in February 1999. He was placed in a Turkish prison on the island of İmralı. In 1999, from prison, Öcalan ordered the PKK to cease fire and to withdraw from Turkey – marking the end of one stage in the history of the Turkey–PKK conflict. The former Turkish president Süleyman Demirel assessed this agreement as “a historic victory of Turkish policy.”

After Öcalan was forced to leave Syria, the Adana agreement retained its force until 2011. In 2011, in the context of the Syrian civil war, Turkey’s open support for the Syrian opposition put an end to all the good relations between the two countries, and the Syrian government returned to using Kurdish groups as a counterweight against Turkey’s efforts. The question of a Kurdish state has been debated in scholarly circles for several decades, and three principal views have taken shape. The first holds that Kurdistan possesses all the marks of statehood, so that declaring independence is only a matter of time. The second school is more sceptical, asserting that talk of independence is merely tactical and that the obstacles are very great. The third school holds that the Kurds’ interests lie in remaining within Iraq, and considers this the most promising option (Azeez, 2023). But this debate is no longer remaining only at the theoretical level. The events that occurred in the region in 2025 demand a reconsideration of all the scenarios. Kurdistan is now in a deep economic crisis. The KDP had claimed that selling oil and forming an economy independent of Baghdad would bring Kurdistan onto the global energy map and secure independence; but this policy of economic independence has so far failed. Since Baghdad halted the KRG’s share of the federal budget in February 2014, the KRG has faced a severe economic crisis; according to the Iraqi Kurdistan Minister of Natural Resources, Ashti Hawrami, the KRG’s total debts amount to about 20 billion dollars.

CONCLUSION

The study of the Kurdish factor in Turkey’s foreign policy has shown that this question has become a geopolitical phenomenon far larger than a simple security problem. The Kurds exert a direct influence on all of Ankara’s strategic decisions in the region. Across the historical span from the Treaty of Lausanne to the present day, it can be seen that Turkey has consistently used the Kurdish question in two ways: on the one

hand, strengthening internal and external legitimacy through a security doctrine directed against the PKK; on the other, expanding its economic influence in the region by developing energy and trade cooperation with Iraqi Kurdistan. After the Syrian crisis, this twofold relationship became still sharper: military operations against the YPG and the SDF reshaped Turkey's relations with the United States and NATO, opened the way to a rapprochement with Russia, and finally, through the blocking of Sweden's and Finland's NATO membership, brought the Kurdish factor for the first time fully to the centre of the Atlantic security architecture. In this sense, the Kurdish question is for Turkey not merely a problem to be solved – it has become at once the principal driving force of foreign policy, a source of diplomatic leverage, and the most important card in the regional game; and this shows that the question will remain a priority factor shaping Ankara's international conduct in the near future as well.

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