

IDENTITY FORMATION AND POLITICAL MOBILIZATION IN DIASPORA:  
KURDISH DIASPORA IN THE UNITED STATES

by

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Identity Formation and Political Mobilization in Diaspora: Kurdish Diaspora in the  
United States

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my wife Elisa and to my family who have supported me during my studies.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

AKIN: American Kurdish Information Network

AKA: American Kurdish Association

AKP: Justice and Development Party

BDP: Peace and Democracy Party

DDKO: Revolutionary Eastern Cultural Hearts

DTP: Democratic Society Party

EU: European Union

HADEP: People's Democracy Party

HDK: Peoples' Democratic Congress

HDK NY: Peoples' Democratic Congress New York

HDP: Peoples' Democratic Party

IS: The Islamic State

ISIS: The Islamic States of Iraq and the Levant

KDP: Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq

KRG: Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq

MGK: National Security Council

NATO: North Atlantic Treat Organization

NEKA: New England Kurdish Association



NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

OHAL: Regional State of Emergency Governorate

PDK-Iran: The Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan

PKK: Kurdistan Workers' Party / Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan

PYD: the Democratic Union Party

TAK: Kurdistan Freedom Falcons

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

U.S.: The United States

UN: The United Nations

WKI: Washington Kurdish Institute

YPG: Peoples' Protection Units

YPJ: Women Protection Units

## **ABSTRACT**

### **IDENTITY FORMATION AND POLITICAL MOBILIZATION IN DIASPORA: KURDISH DIASPORA IN THE UNITED STATES**

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This thesis explores the Kurdish diaspora's formation in the United States and the role that the Kurdish diaspora's political mobilization plays in fueling and/or resolving the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. The investigated research question is: What are the perceptions of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict among Kurdish diaspora members in the United States and what types of political mobilization do they engage in?

This research is based on semi-structured open-ended interviews of the core members of the Kurdish diaspora in United States regarding their political mobilization. The analysis of the data was conducted with thematic coding: the emerging themes were identified and discussed. While the research deals with political mobilization, it delves into whom and what triggers the mobilization and how/when the diaspora mobilizes. The research found out that the Kurdish diaspora has developed historic narratives about the Turkish-Kurdish relations and promotes constructive ways of resolving the conflict.

This could be an influence of living in a country where the concept of national identity is based on multiculturalism, but further research is needed to make a fair assessment how much the host countries national identities play a role in diaspora's conflict behavior.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On July 24, 2015, the Kurdish diaspora community organized a rally in front of the Turkish embassy in Washington, DC to protest the recent attack staged by the Islamic State that killed 32 young citizens, mostly Kurdish, in the Kurdish town of Suruc, Turkey. Those young citizens were en route to the battle hardened Kurdish city of Kobani in Rojava, northwestern Syria. The reason for the rally in front of the Turkish embassy was the Turkish government's involvement with extremist groups in Syria including ISIS, and government's failure to protect its Kurdish citizens. When Kurdish diaspora members arrived, there was a large number of Turkish diaspora members backed by embassy staff who were already in front of the embassy prepared for the counter rally. Over the course of the rally, Kurds shouted, "Turkey is ISIS" and "Turkey and ISIS are the same, the only difference is the name" and Turks retorted, "PKK is terrorist like ISIS." This situation is what diaspora literature has called "imported conflict." Although the focus of this research is not "imported conflict", these types of confrontations in host lands showcase the dynamics of the homeland conflicts and diaspora mobilization which has often been considered a core component of diaspora formation. These confrontations and mobilization are indicative of what Anderson called long-distance nationalism which can be defined as preservation of the loyalties for a homeland and a sense of belonging to a collective identity (Anderson, 1991).

In recent years, the number of civil wars has increased, as has the role that non-state actors play in them. Diasporas being one of those non-state actors; some scholars have pointed out the role that the diaspora community plays in conflicts in their homelands. Diaspora sometimes contributes to the resolution of the conflict while at other time they exacerbate the conflict. Diaspora groups have become important actors in intergroup conflicts with the rapid development in communication technology and cross boundary mobility. The ongoing intrastate conflicts have tremendously increased the number of refugees around the world. With these increased numbers, diaspora have become an important non-state actor on the international stage. Diaspora groups who in some cases have a tremendous influence over intergroup conflicts in the homeland have drawn the attention of their host and home countries' policy makers as well as social scientists (Lyons and Mandeville, 2012, Baser, 2015).

Kurds are the largest ethnic group in the Middle East without a nation state of their own. Even though there is not any official census data available regarding their population, Kurds are estimated to number between 30 and 35 million across the globe (Hassanpour and Mojab, 2005, p.214). They are primarily concentrated at the intersection of four major countries: Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. Kurds have risen up against the governments of these countries since the beginning of the past century. None of the uprisings have resulted in a Kurdish nation state. After or during each uprising Kurds have fled their homeland for other countries and formed diaspora communities around the world.

“Globalization and the rise of ethnic conflicts have allowed diasporas to become important international political actors. Globalization has also intensified diasporic groups’ ties with their homeland and increased their ability to influence a conflict in their homeland” (Bercovitch, 2007, p.21). Kurdish diasporas have been active, especially in Europe, influencing the policies of their host countries and the attitudes of their members towards countries that rule over Kurdistan. Many research studies show that Kurdish diaspora communities have played a significant role in shaping Kurdish nationalism that drives the national struggle from afar and at home (Wahlbeck, 1999; Alinia, 2004; Khayati, 2008; Eccarius-Kelly, 2011; Eliassi, 2013). Therefore, determining the level of influence that the diaspora plays in fueling or resolving conflicts is critical for the conflict analysis and resolution field.

The activities of the Kurdish diaspora especially in Europe have exacerbated the Kurdish conflict in Turkey through their provision of financial and human capital to the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan or Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). Kurdish diaspora members have maintained their ties to Kurdistan and have had an impact on the behavior of people and structure of the conflicts occurring in the homeland. Since the Kurdish diaspora is “conflict-generated” (Koinova, 2013), it has always played an active role in the conflicts they left behind with a desire to return home one day. When attempting to settle on a possible intervention, members of the diaspora would have to be included for a sustainable resolution. Koinova notes that “conflict-generated diasporas are considered more likely to maintain a myth of return, attachment to a homeland territory, and to display radical attitudes and behaviors regarding homeland political processes” (Koinova,

2013, p. 433). As it was stated, diasporas can play a crucial role in resolving homeland conflicts, so when designing intervention plans for conflicts, conflicts resolution practitioners and scholars should definitely include diaspora in conflict mapping.

The focus of this research is primarily on the Kurds living in the United States who came from Turkish Kurdistan. The majority of these Kurds migrated from their homeland because of the four-decade long Turkish-Kurdish conflict. Thus, since their dispersal was because of the homeland conflict, they have been closely following the homeland conflict and trying to play a role in it. To narrow down the scope of the research, Kurds who came from other parts of Kurdistan were left out of this research. However, to capture a holistic perspective on Kurdistan, historical background of Kurds living in Iran, Iraq, and Syria were briefly covered in the chapter three. In this research, Kurdish diaspora in the United States only refers to those who came from Turkey.

### **Purpose of this Research**

The purpose of this research is to explore the Kurdish diaspora's formation in the United States and the role that the Kurdish diaspora's political mobilization plays in fueling and/or resolving the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. What are the perceptions of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict among Kurdish diaspora members in the United States and what types of political mobilization do they engage in? While sometimes diaspora contributes to exacerbating their homeland conflicts, at other times they play a role in resolving homeland conflicts. In other words, diaspora may be an obstacle to conflict resolution

and peacebuilding or facilitator of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Research on Kurdish diaspora in various European countries has shown that Kurdish diaspora has played both above-mentioned roles in the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. However, there has been any research on the role of Kurdish diaspora in the United States in the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. Unlike European Kurdish diaspora, American Kurdish diaspora has not been in any violent confrontations neither with the U.S. government nor with the Turkish diaspora. These two different stances by the Kurdish diaspora in two different continents might be because of the political space that the respective governments provide for the Other in their countries to voice their concerns. The concept of multi-cultural national identity in the United States might have an influence on the Kurdish diaspora's role in the homeland conflict. Thus, the Kurdish diaspora in the United States has mostly been advocating for a peaceful resolution of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict as it mobilizes to influence U.S. policy makers.

As such, this research used semi-structured open-ended interviews to collect data from core members of the Kurdish diaspora in United States regarding their political mobilization. While the research deals with political mobilization, it delves into whom and what triggers the mobilization and how/when the diaspora mobilizes.

Scholars have pointed out the important role that diaspora play in intergroup conflicts (Bercovitch, 2007). Some diaspora communities form because of the intergroup conflicts happening in their homeland. These types of diasporas are rightly termed as a "conflict generated" (Koinova, 2013). Since the displacement of "conflict generated" diasporas are not voluntary, they tend to remain attached to the homeland and keep the



myth of return. Much scholarship has focused on the Kurdish diaspora in European countries (Wahlbeck, 1999; Alinia, 2004; Khayati, 2008; Eccarius-Kelly, 2011; Eliassi, 2013; Baser, 2015). The focus has been mostly on the diaspora formation and sense of belonging of diaspora's first and second generations. However, there has not been any research on the Kurdish diaspora living in the United States and its involvement in the homeland conflict.

“Conflict generated” diasporas are dispersed involuntarily and they tend to take a more radical stance against the country or the group that caused their dispersal. Thus, the boundary that they draw between their groups and the other group is more visible. They are more likely to construct narratives of their identities in a way that sharply divides groups into an Us vs Them duality. Therefore, exploring the construction of the narratives of an ingroup and how this ingroup positions the outgroup in their narratives is important for the conflict analysis and resolution field because these narratives and narrative positioning should be altered in order to solve the intergroup conflict. The narratives that are being told and retold overtime become a component of ingroup identity and shapes the ingroup's social boundary against the outgroup. In this research I am interested in exploring the construction of identity narratives of the Kurdish diaspora in the United States, what role does the Kurdish diaspora plays in the Turkish-Kurdish conflict and finally what triggers their mobilization in the hostland.

Kurdish national movements in the four different countries that rule over Kurdistan “have become more complex with the growth of what have been termed diasporic communities, involving permanent settlements while retaining homeland

bonds” (Anthias, 2002, p.500). Since the 1990s, the Kurdish diaspora has been mobilized on a large scale and played an important role in the Kurdish struggle towards establishing a nation state of their own. It tends to mobilize faster and in large scale at times when conflicts or injustices occur in the homeland. Koinova argues that “dynamics in original homeland drive the overall trend toward radicalism or moderation of diaspora mobilization in a host-land” (Koinova, 2013, p. 434). Constructing narratives of their diasporic identity play a significant role in the identity formation of the diaspora communities. The form of identity Kurdish diaspora communities are forming can be described as a mobilized identity, which is based on We-They opposition. Kurds feel a low status in diaspora and they blame the outgroup, which forced them to leave their homeland to avoid discrimination and oppression by the outgroup. Korostelina notes that “[l]ooking for ways to change this situation, [the ingroup] will acquire a *mobilized form* of ethnic identity” (Korostelina, 2007a, p.87).

Hence, narratives constructed by the Kurdish diaspora in the U.S. take on the mobilized form of identity. Therefore, Kurdish diaspora communities have strong ties to the conflicts in Kurdistan. They have brought the plight of the Kurds and Kurdistan to the attention of the host countries by mobilizing in large scale in reaction to the injustices occurring in the homeland. In the age of globalization, diaspora can play a crucial role in solving or fueling conflicts. Therefore, understanding diaspora communities and the narratives that they reconstruct are very important in finding a sustainable resolution to intergroup conflicts (Baser, 2011, p.4).

Both Safran (1991) and Cohen (2008) point out that diaspora communities believe that they should be committed to the issues surrounding restoration, safety, and prosperity of the imagined homeland. Therefore, mobilizing in solidarity with the imagined homeland is a duty of the diaspora members. Solidarity with the group members in the homeland, imagined co-ethnic members in other countries, and in the hostland indicates group loyalty and co-responsibility.

The structure of this research is as follows. First, it explains the theoretical discussion of diaspora and identity. Second, it discusses the historical background of the Kurdish issue with a focus on the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. Third, it provides an explanation regarding research methodology and data gathering. Fourth, it analyzes the data and emerging themes from the data. It concludes with a discussion of the data and recommendations.

## **CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Theoretical Approach to Diaspora**

The theoretical framework is crucial in understanding diaspora mobilization and involvement in homeland politics or conflicts. This theoretical framework seeks to explore and understand why, how, and when Kurdish diaspora in the United States mobilize and what contributions does it make to solve the Turkish-Kurdish conflict in Turkey. The theoretical framework is analyzed in two major sections: theoretical approaches to diaspora and identity.

Diasporas have been an increasingly popular subject for researchers to explore in recent decades (Safran 1991, Sheffer 2003, Shain and Barth, 2003, Brubaker 2005, Cohen 2008, Adamson 2012, and Baser 2015). There is a growing abundance in the research on diaspora and migration research focusing on different aspects of diaspora formation, political mobilization, or transnationalism. The term diaspora used to define expatriates, exiles, refugees, immigrants, displaced communities, and minorities. Diaspora groups have become important actors in intergroup conflicts with the rapid development in communication technology and cross boundary mobility. The ongoing intrastate conflicts have tremendously increased the number of refugees around the world. According to UNHCR, this number has surpassed 50 million people. With this increased number, diasporas have become important non-state actors on the international

stage. Diaspora groups who in some cases have a tremendous influence over intergroup conflicts in homeland have drawn the attention of their host and home countries' policy makers as well as social scientists (Lyons and Mandeville, 2012, Baser, 2015).

As the role of these non-state actors increase from afar in homeland conflicts, researchers have investigated the nature of this role and focused on the attachments of diasporas to the homeland and their role as peace-makers or peace wreckers (Smith, 2007).

The root causes of the conflicts and the grievances of those who flee their homeland do not disappear once they immigrate to another country (Baser, 2015). Changing location does not heal the traumatic experience of those who were traumatized in their homeland because of the intergroup conflicts. In most cases diaspora members carry their grievances with them and find channels to address their grievances in the host countries by advocating for those of their identity group remaining in the homeland. The conflicts play an important role in how conflict generated diasporas construct their identities and how this identities are transformed in the host countries. Thus, while these types of diasporas engage in identity construction, they transnationalize their homeland conflicts.

Scholars have not agreed on an accepted definition of diaspora across all disciplines. The term has previously been applied to Jews, Greeks, and Armenians. However, in nearly three decades at least 30 ethnic groups either called themselves or have been called diaspora at the expense of being criticized by some scholars (Baser, 2015, p.17). Brubaker stated that the term "becomes stretched to the point of uselessness.

If everyone is diasporic, then no one is distinctively so” (Brubaker, 2005). The distinction between the diaspora groups and other migrant or transnational groups is not clear-cut. Thus, the meaning and the concept of diaspora require clarification. The debate over who constitute diaspora led to several different definitions. While some of these definitions are used very loosely that result in vagueness, some are so detailed that they fail to identify some immigrants groups that have been considered diasporas by researchers (Baser, 2015, p.17). The most referred to definition has been the one provided by Safran (1991). He defined diaspora with six criteria.

- 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original “center” to two or more “peripheral,” or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship (Safran, 1991, p.83-84).

Several scholars have criticized Safran's definition of diaspora for falling short of capturing the all the transnational communities that are considered diaspora. Cohen (2008) specifically criticized Safran's categorization, which was inspired by the historical Jewish diaspora experience. According to Cohen (2008), the Jewish experience cannot be applied to modern diasporas because the formation of some modern diasporas may not be the result of traumatic dispersion. Cohen (2008) proposes four additional features: 1) groups that disperse for colonial or voluntarist reasons, 2) there should be more recognition of the positive virtues of retaining a diasporic identity, 3) diasporas are often mobilize collective identity, "not only a place of settlement or only in respect of an imagined, putative or real homeland, but also in solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries," 4) diaspora can be used to describe transnational bond of co-responsibility even where historically exclusive territorial claims are not strongly articulated (Cohen, 2008, p.8).

Another criticism to Safran's definition is regarding the desire of returning to the homeland one day. Faist (2010) pointed out that this idea of return has been replaced by the transnational mobility. Studying African diaspora Clifford (1994), has pointed out that many diasporas have no notion of returning back to their home countries.

Some scholars including Safran have pointed out the connection between diaspora experiencing a traumatic dispersal. However, attributing traumatic dispersal to diaspora may not be inclusive of all diaspora groups. Baser quoting Bauböck suggests that while traumatic dispersal is not necessary to define a group as a diaspora, traumatic dispersal certainly forms individuals' identities among migrants whose displacement was not

voluntary as is the case for the majority of Kurdish diaspora members (Sökefeld, 2006, p.272; Baser, 2015, p.18). While sometimes construction of a diaspora group may not be right after the dispersal, it may emerge in response to events taking place in the homeland (Baser, 2015, p.19). Lyons following Volkan's (1997) "transgenerational transmission" writes the traumatic dispersal is mostly "vivid in the minds of the first generation and is often kept alive in subsequent generations thorough commemorations and symbols (Lyons, 2006, p.113). Diaspora organizations and networks might ensure that the traumatic dispersal is remembered and transmitted to the next generation. Volkan notes that those who experience a traumatic event "pass down the memory of the tragedy and their feelings about it to their descendants" (Volkan, 1997, p.41).

Among various competing definitions, it seems Brubaker's categorizations of the diaspora is the most inclusive one. Brubaker (2005) suggests that one can identify diaspora by three core elements, which provide leverage for a more analytical appraisal of the 'diaspora' diaspora. These three core elements provide an analytical tool for exploring the Kurdish diaspora in this research.

1. *Dispersion:* Dispersion in space is the most widely accepted criterion. It can be forced or traumatic dispersal. This dispersion in space refers to people living outside their homeland.

2. *Homeland Orientation:* This criterion refers to a real or imagined homeland "as an authoritative source of value, identity and loyalty." Homeland orientation is the major factor in the determination of the formation of a diasporic identity. The mobilization of the diaspora determines the strength of their ties to



homeland issues, maintaining a collective memory or myth of return, commitment to the restoration, safety, and prosperity of the homeland, shared narratives, and identity and solidarity (Brubaker, 2005, p.5).

3. *Boundary-Maintenance*: This involves the preservation of a distinctive identity vis-à-vis a host society. Diasporas can maintain boundaries in host societies by deliberately resisting assimilation through self-segregation. Brubaker noted that boundary-maintenance is “an indispensable criterion of diaspora”. It enables us “to speak of a diaspora as a distinctive ‘community’, held together by a distinctive, active solidarity, as well as by relatively dense social relationships, that cut across state boundaries and link members of the diaspora in different states into a single ‘transnational community’” (Brubaker, 2005, p.6). The meaning of the diaspora has been stretched in various directions. It is important to clarify a conceptual definition that could be applied to a specific diaspora case. The above definition that Brubaker provides is the most applicable definition for this research. Therefore, in this research the term diaspora is used within the boundaries of these three criteria: dispersion, homeland orientation, and boundary-maintenance. The Kurdish diaspora has been dispersed from their homeland. Despite living in the U.S., they are often mobilized around homeland issues or homeland issues trigger their mobilization. The Kurdish diaspora still preserves their Kurdish identity; in fact, in many cases, the Kurdish identity is more salient than American identity.

### **Approaches to Diaspora Formation: Constructivist or Essentialist**

As has been argued in the studies on nationalism and identity, the diaspora literature also have debated the issue of whether diasporas are natural phenomenon (essentialist approach) or socially constructed (constructivist approach) (Adamson, 2012, p. 27). The constructivist approach sees diasporas as transnationally mobilized “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1991). This notion of “imagined communities” may refer to either real or imagined homeland. Essentialists argue that diasporas emerge as a result of migration, exile, and dispersal. However, constructivists argue that diasporas are socially constructed through discourse, elite manipulation, diaspora organizations, or political mobilization around collective identities (Adamson, 2012, p.27). Baser paraphrasing Bertrand (2004) states that the primordialist (essentialist) point of view misreads the reality in numbers of ways. First, “it distorts the number of people who belong to the diaspora by accepting each and every person from the same ethnic origin as a part of a diasporic community but in reality there is a big gap between the people who are mobilized and the statistical figures about the number of people who are categorized as members of a diaspora.” Second, people should have a choice in determining whether they want to be categorized or not (Baser, 2015, p.20). The essentialist perspective ignores the mobilization, which is an important factor of diaspora formation. It risks essentializing the diaspora as an ethnic label rather than a framework of analysis. While diaspora organizations claim to represent the diaspora in its entirety, some people from

the similar background may not join these organizations (Baser, 2015, p.20). Diasporas are not homogenous entities.

As Adamson points out, diasporas can be viewed as “products or outcomes of transnational mobilization activities by political entrepreneurs engaged in strategic social identity construction” (Adamson, 2012, p.25-26). This strategic social identity construction forms the diaspora not just simply a transnational boundary crossing process. Diasporas social identity or identities are in line with political identity since it provides a sense of empowerment away from homeland. The social identities that fulfill diaspora members’ sense of security become salient. The salience of diaspora’s social identities may change according to the diasporas relations with the hostland or homeland. The discussion of identity will be addressed in the second part of this section.

Experiences within both the homeland and host country play a role in the formation of diasporic identity. The salience of this identity changes according to events happening in the homeland. Recognition of identities that are constructed in the transnational space is fundamental for the diaspora formation. Diaspora formation is not just the result of dispersal in space, but also it is constructed through a mobilization effort of diaspora entrepreneurs.

Intentions of diaspora elites play a role in whether diasporas advocates for peace or conflict in the homeland. Politically active diaspora elites around a homeland issue tend to encourage the mobilization of more members of the diaspora. While at times members of diaspora groups are individually motivated to show their support for the

homeland, “it is the *elite efforts* that draw the framework for *repertoires of action*” (Baser, 2015, p.21).

As was pointed out above, diasporas are socially constructed outcomes of the transnational political mobilization initiated by the diaspora elites in the host countries. Diasporas are not homogenous entities. A diaspora group may contain various sub-groups. While scholars such as Cohen and Sheffer’s categorization of diasporas into labour, conflict-generated, exile, or victim provide some analytical concept, researchers should keep in mind that these labels of diaspora groups are not static. A diaspora group may have initially been a labor diaspora. However, because a conflict emerged in the homeland, the labor diaspora may be mobilized around the homeland conflict as is the case for the Turkish and Kurdish diaspora in Germany (Baser, 2015, p.21-22).

Sheffer (2014) argues that there are six essential factors that need to be taken into account when exploring diasporas and their engagement in intergroup conflicts to avoid superficial generalization. First, diasporas involved in intergroup conflicts occurring in their homelands are not homogeneous entities. Second, diaspora activists propagate the idea that their origins are not in their current host country. Third, some diaspora groups are involved in the conflicts in their host country and home country (i.e., Turks and Kurds in Germany). Fourth, not all diaspora members are equally involved in their homeland conflicts constantly. Fifth, there are critical variations in diaspora involvement in intergroup conflicts. When conflicts are in the violent stage, they may exhibit violent behavior. However, if the conflict is resolved, the diaspora may resume their peaceful behavior. Finally, diaspora communities are also actively involved in their host and home

countries cultural, social, political, and economic activities (Sheffer, 2014, p.85-86).

To understand diaspora structure Sheffer and Shain and Barth divide diaspora membership into three categories.

Sheffer's three groups of mobilized diaspora are:

1. *Core members*: Core members are born into their ethnic group, eagerly maintain their identity, overtly identify as members of their diasporic community, and are ready to act on behalf of their community and homeland.

2. *Marginal members*: Marginal members are those who maintain their ethnic identity "but do not identify as such" or deliberately keep a distance from the community.

3. *Dormant members*: Dormant members are the ones who have integrated into their host societies but still have consciousness of their roots in the diaspora community. They can be mobilized by the diaspora leaders and organization under certain circumstances such as homeland conflicts (Sheffer, 2003, p.100).

Like Sheffer, Shain and Barth divide the members of mobilized diaspora into three categories:

1. *Core members*: These members are the diaspora elites that organize diaspora, are actively involved in diaspora community affairs, and in a position to mobilize diaspora members.

2. *Passive members*: These members might be available for mobilization when diaspora leadership calls on them.

3. *Silent members*: These members are the ones who are not involved in

diaspora community affairs. However, they may mobilize in times of crisis such as homeland conflict (Shain and Barth, 2003, p.452-453).

These categorizations are useful because it places mobilization at the center of diaspora politics and classifications. These categorizations are created from the mobilization point of view that focuses mostly on the core members. The studies that only focus on mobilization may ignore the knowledge that is produced by the marginal/passive and dormant/silent members (Baser, 2015, p.22). While conducting this research I interviewed mostly core members, although I tried to pay attention to the views of the aforementioned other two categories as well. The boundaries between these categories are flexible and fluid.

Baser explains what mobilizes the silent members of the diaspora. She quotes Safran (2007) that “diaspora consciousness may be revived after a special event, such as revolutionary struggle or a tragic experience that brings back the importance of the kinship connection” (quoted in Baser, 2015, p.22). Diaspora identification might be activated by specific events and developments occurring in the homeland. Demmers calls these triggering events a “diasporic turn” (Demmers, 2007, p.8). The events might or might not be very important in their nature. However, the particular way these events are framed and perceived changes the degree of their importance. “No matter how critical the event is, it is important that there are political entrepreneurs who take up the action of mobilizing masses around a unified idea related to this seminal event” (Baser, 2015, p.23). As such, diasporas are not simply natural entities that emerge out of boundary crossing; in fact, they are socially constructed by political entrepreneurs.

## **Diaspora Organizations**

It is important to mention diaspora organizations because they are necessary to bring scattered diaspora networks together for mobilization. Diaspora organizations are entities overwhelmingly established by the diaspora's core members and led by diaspora leaders. Diaspora entrepreneurs, ethnic leaders, or elites "act carefully in order to construct a diasporic identity which will encompass a discourse that will bring a collective identity into being" (Baser, 2015, p.23). Diaspora leaders create narratives to mobilize people around and "allocate roles of the good and the villains to specific actors, thereby promoting a biased and emotionally charged view on the conflict situation" (Baser, 2015, p.23).

These diaspora actors have a tremendous influence over creating perceptions of the diaspora members about the Other. The Other that caused their dispersal is depicted as immoral, unjust, and inhumane. Korostelina and Rothbart explain this "mode of thinking associated with the global devaluation of the Other" (Korostelina and Rothbart, 2006, p.8). This perception of the Other, how the ingroup and outgroup perceive one another and the value system that groups create influence their projection of the Other.

Diaspora organizations consolidate and constitute the boundaries of diasporic identities. While they may strengthen the diaspora's engagement to the homeland, they may also commit to enhancing the rights of diaspora members in the host country. Diaspora organizations channel the voice of individual diaspora members into an effective and coherent movement (Baser, 2015, p.24). Not all migrant organizations can

be considered diasporic. The boundaries of the migrant and diaspora organizations may overlap, and their status may change over time.

### **The Triadic Relationship**

Diasporas are non-state actors that play an important role in homeland and hostland politics as well as in the transnational space by connecting to their fellow ethnic members in other countries. Diaspora activism influences the homeland directly and it mobilizes its activities to use hostland channels to have an influence on homeland policies. Diasporas may use lobbying mechanism or establish a diaspora organization in the host country to influence policy makers. They are usually more efficient in influencing policy makers of the hostland. If diaspora have large constituencies in the hostland, they may alter the elections results of the area where they predominantly reside in the hostland. Baser wrote, “There is a triadic relationship among diasporas, territorial states and contexts where such groups reside, and the homeland states and the contexts where they or their forebears come from; and diaspora theory has been structured around these multi-faceted relationships among these three actors” (Baser, 2015, p.25). Below I will explore this triadic relationship more specifically.

### **Homeland-Diaspora Relations**

A connection to a real or imagined homeland is one of the most important components of the diasporic identity. As non-state actors, diasporas in some cases have



tremendous influence on homeland politics and conflicts through supporting armed groups, by providing financial and human capital. Globalization and advancement in communication technologies have made interaction between the homeland, hostland, and the fellow ethnic members in the transnational space easier than ever.

Displacement from homeland occurs for various reasons. The reasons might be economic, homeland conflict, fear of persecution, or individual freedom. The relationship between the homeland and those who leave for another country does not end there. In fact, it evolves in diaspora over the course of the time (Baser, 2015, p.25). The diaspora members almost always have a notion of returning to their country of origin. Especially if the displacement was not voluntary, it causes a stronger desire to return one day when conditions are better or the danger has passed. In the case of stateless diasporas, the members of the diaspora might profess a desire to return to the homeland when it is free. Likewise, several of my participants indicated their desire to return homeland when is free. An excerpt from Wahlbeck's research participants provides an example for stateless diaspora members' desire to return homeland.

I would like to return to Kurdistan, I think that I am the first family that will move back when Kurdistan becomes free. If there were a democratic leader, and peace and safety, after that I would go back. That is why I am here [Finland], because there is no security. I think that some day I will go back; it is impossible for me to imagine that I would stay here (Wahlbeck, 1999, p.107).

The degree of relations to the homeland is the main determinant of the diaspora

mobilization (Baser, 2015, p.25). The attachment to the homeland becomes the core of a diaspora's collective identity.

### **Hostland-Diaspora Relations**

The relationship between the diaspora and the hostland is important because it directly affects diaspora formation (Baser, 2015, p.25).

The opportunity structures and the hostland's approach to diaspora groups determine the level to which the diaspora can mobilize in the hostland. The host country may have good relations with the home country of diaspora or if the diaspora is stateless, it may back the diaspora mobilization for the support of establishing a nation state of their own. The hostland may put restrictions or ban on the organizations or the armed groups that diaspora supports. Changing relations between the hostland and the homeland affects the diaspora's relations with the hostland as well. In the case of stateless diasporas, if the host country has good relations with the homeland, then the diaspora community may not have enough room to influence hostland policies toward the homeland (Baser, 2015, p.25).

Opportunity structures for diaspora in the hostland are dynamic. As the homeland conflict goes through different cycles, "the hostland might provide different opportunities; at times it may limit the scope of diaspora activism in order not to jeopardize its relations with the other state, or at other times it might provide a huge range of opportunities at the discursive and political level in order to challenge the other state. The relations between the homeland and the hostland might become difficult when

the homeland wants to curb or accelerate the diaspora formation of a certain group in the hostland” (Baser, 2015b, p.5).

### **Homeland-Hostland Relations**

The relations between homeland and the hostland affect mobilization and activism. If the host country has unfavorable relations towards the home country, it may support the diaspora to prolong the conflict in the homeland. In the case of the stateless diasporas like Kurds, when the relations between host countries and homeland countries are in good terms, the Kurdish diaspora mobilization may be curtailed in the hostland. For example, the alliance between Turkey and the United States affects the Kurdish diaspora’s activism in the United States. The United States government discounts any lobbying activities by the Kurdish diaspora with a few exceptions in the past (see chapter 5). However, during the Saddam era in Iraq the United States government was responsive to the Kurds from Iraq regarding their lobbying effort to help Kurds in that country. In fact, Kurdish diaspora provided support to the United States during the Iraqi operation (Denise Natali, 2007). This situation triggered the American journalist/filmmaker Kevin McKiernan mind to name his documentary on the Kurds and Kurdish American diaspora “Good Kurds, Bad Kurds”.<sup>1</sup>

### **Diaspora Involvement in Homeland Conflicts and Peace Processes**

The roles of the transnational actors in civil wars or conflicts have increased in

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<sup>1</sup> To see the movie: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbAGK7WHs2o>

recent years as have the number of studies that examine these actors. A number of studies have been published focusing on diaspora as actors exacerbating conflict or mediating and resolving conflict (Adamson, 2013; Koinova, 2013; Smith and Stares, 2007; Collier and Hoeffler, 2004). I intend to broaden the understanding of diaspora mobilization and diaspora involvement in homeland conflicts by examining the Kurdish diaspora's involvement in homeland conflicts. Advancement in communication and transportation technologies has provided opportunities for diaspora community to sustain attachment to their homelands. Thus, diasporas have been involved in their homeland politics and conflicts from their countries of residence. In some cases, diasporas may contribute to the conflict resolution. However, in some other cases, their involvement in homeland conflicts may exacerbate conflict (Bercovitch, 2007, p. 17). Diaspora communities may encourage the parties in conflict to find a sustainable solution through negotiation or diplomacy. However, diaspora communities may prolong the conflict through financial and human capital. Some scholars (Lyons, 2006; Demmers, 2007, Adamson, 2013) have argued that members of diasporas may support the violent conflicts in their home countries, without paying the consequences of living in societies marked by physical or structural violence (Adamson, 2013, p.65). Considering their level of involvement in homeland conflicts, diasporas must be included in the peace processes of the conflicts for a sustainable resolution.

Adamson has identified five casual mechanisms that could be used to systematically compare diaspora involvement in conflicts across different cases. These mechanisms are categorized into two subsets. The first set is related to “the process of

diaspora mobilization,” and it consists of *transnational brokerage, strategic framing, and ethnic or sectarian outbidding*. The second set is related to “the impacts of mobilization on violent conflict,” and it includes *resource mobilization and lobbying and persuasion* (Adamson, 2013, p.67-68).

#### *The process of diaspora mobilization*

The *transnational brokers* have the ability to link dispersed diaspora networks. An important component of diaspora involvement in homeland conflicts is linking diaspora networks transnationally in different host countries as well as linking these transnational networks with the homeland that either perpetuate or resolve the homeland conflicts. Adamson notes that *transnational brokerage or brokers* “play a role in connecting a group or network symbolically but also materially to a conflict” (Adamson, 2013, p.69).

The concept of *strategic framing* is borrowed from the literature of social movements and, it refers to diaspora actors articulating “frames that resonate with members of diaspora groups in ways that successfully align the perceptions, values, or interests of diaspora members with those of civil war actors or conflict entrepreneurs” (Adamson, 2013, p.70). With the strategic framing, diaspora actors may deploy the notions of belonging to a national identity or kinship to mobilize diaspora members. These actors may appeal to diaspora members that they are obligated to maintain their ties to the homeland and get involve with the homeland conflicts and politics (Adamson, 2013, p. 70).

*Ethnic or sectarian outbidding* refers to the situations in which parties or elites attempt to outdo each other to establish hegemony or gain power. Operation of the diaspora organizations can be similar to political parties. Constructing diaspora as having sense of belonging to a real or imagined homeland creates incentives for diaspora organizations to try to increase their power over each other in their articulation of national or ethnic identity (Adamson, 2013, 271).

*The impact of mobilization on violent conflict*

Once the diaspora is mobilized, how does this transnationally mobilized diaspora impact the homeland conflict? Adamson argues that *resource mobilization* and *lobbying and persuasion* mechanisms help to explain the impact of diaspora on homeland conflicts (Adamson, 2013, p. 71). *Resource mobilization* refers to the efforts of diaspora entrepreneurs to gain access to the resources in the host country in order to utilize them to support homeland conflicts. It can be human and financial resources (Adamson, 2013, p.72).

Diasporas can impact the course of homeland conflicts by *lobbying and persuasion* mechanism to engage policy actors of the host country with their homeland (Adamson, 2013, p.72). The mobilization to influence policy makers is one of the core components of the diaspora formation.

## **Identity and Diasporas**

A discussion of social identities and how some of these identities become salient is important for explaining diaspora member's identity formation and their intention toward their homeland conflicts.

Tajfel and Turner (2004) explained that social identity is the individual's self-concept that derived from perceived membership of social group. Likewise, Pettigrew (2007) argues that social identity links human beings as individuals with their groups and societies (p.34). Social identity shapes individuals' both cognitive and emotional self-conception. Social identity "serves as a "home" that no longer exists in an individualized world of globalization and is perceived as a comfortable shelter that provides protection and certainty" (E. Hobsbawn, 1994, quoted in Korostelina, 2007a, p. 17). Individuals usually feel closer and safer to those who share similarities with them. Korostelina wrote "social identity is a feeling of belonging to a social group", so groups make favorable comparisons to increase their self-esteem, increase social status, provide a sense of security, receive recognition by in-group, and receive in-group support and protection (Korostelina, 2007a, p. 67).

Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 2004) points out that identity is formed through individual's membership in an in-group and the in-group's comparison to an out-group. Ingroups project negative attributes to the out-group. This leads to developments of intergroup negative attitudes, prejudice, and conflict behavior. These in-group and out-group dynamics that categorize the world into Us vs Them duality produce biases and stereotypes. Korostelina points out that "the existence of an out-group and the in-group's

negative and conflict-ridden relations with it strengthen group identity” (Korostelina, 2007b, p.51).

Korostelina (2007b) in her discussion of the system of social identities argues that social identity system determines the salience of identity based on a particular social context (p.50). She defines identity as a system and divides it into three categories: *core identities* which are fairly stable and dominant, *short term identities* which go through constant changes, and *situational identities* depend on the concrete situations (Korostelina, 2007b, p.50-51).

Despite these classifications, all identities are connected. The formation process of an identity may be influenced by another identity, and its salience can be increased and decreased by it. The degree of the salience of identities affects the conflict behavior of individuals. “Salient identity can be defined as the most important identity for the individual, and it can be influenced by such factors as permeable/impermeable group boundaries, positive or negative intergroup comparisons, identity distinctiveness issues, and the socialization processes” (Korostelina, 2006, p.102)

Korostelina provides three factors that play a role in increase in the salience of social identity. First, an individual’s national identity (or ethnic identity) can become salient when the person moves to a foreign country where he/she becomes a minority. Second, facing a threat or negative attitudes toward the in-group may affect the salience of social identity. Third, a change in personal values and attitudes may influence the salience of an individual’s social identity (Korostelina, 2006, p.103-104).



The salience of social identity impacts the attitudes and behavioral intentions of individuals. Those with salient national or ethnic identity project more negative attitudes and stereotypes toward the Other (Korostelina, 2007b, p.54-55). Thus, these negative attitudes and stereotypes play a role in conflict readiness of the ingroup and outgroup dynamics. Korostelina (2007b, *ibid*) noted that the readiness for conflict is an extreme consequence of intergroup prejudice.

The salience of social identity and intergroup prejudice and biases are important concepts to understand diaspora interaction with the hostland and homeland. Diaspora members might face exclusion resulting from discrimination, segregation or failure to integrate in the host society. The exclusionary experience is likely to increase the in-group solidarity among diaspora to organize themselves around their collective identity (Baser, 2015, p.27).

“A collective identity forms when a person identifies himself or herself with a group, belongs to this group, shares its beliefs and values, follows its norms and customs, and shows loyalty and deep attachment to its goals and expectations. Thus, a person can be a member of an ethnic, religious, or national group, share a common history or expectations, fight for in-group goals, and thus perceive the world in terms of group relationships” (Korostelina, 2007a, p.84). The core members of a diaspora group preserve their group’s collective identity. On the other hand, the passive and dormant members of diaspora groups might take on the descriptive identity in the absence of the diaspora mobilization. However, if there is conflict or an important event happening in the homeland, their descriptive identity becomes a collective identity. In other words, their

collective social identity becomes salient. Korostelina defines the descriptive identity as “one’s identification with specific social categories without actual membership in a corresponding group. A person thinks and describes oneself in terms of group categories and considers them to be an important part of one’s self-concept. However, he or she does not participate in-group activities and does not share the group’s beliefs, goals, and norms” (Korostelina, 2007a, p.84).

Strong social identities and a sense of belonging to a group with a distinct history, language, and culture become more salient among the diaspora, especially when they do not have a nation state of their own in the homeland and are striving to establish one. The social identities of such communities are intertwined with the national struggle. The struggle and the traumatic folk memories or historical events become markers that bind “imagined transnational community” together. Thus, any threat to the imagined co-ethnic members of the group’s social identity that is constructed around these markers can trigger political mobilization. The form of identity that triggers this mobilization and divides the world into a binary construction of Us vs Them has been defined as mobilized identity. This form of identity is based on intergroup contradiction and competition (Korostelina, 2007a, p. 86).

While the preservation of identity is maintained through segregation and exclusion in hostland, there are also several cases of hybridity. Especially in the countries where the national identity is based on multi-cultural or civic concept, some diaspora members tend to define themselves with hyphenated identities (e.g. Kurdish-American or Italian-American). The concepts of national identity need more explanation here to have

a clear understanding of why diaspora members in this research take on hyphenated identities compared to other diaspora groups in the other countries. However, comparing diaspora groups in different countries with different concepts of national identity is beyond the scope of this research. The only reason a comparison may be referred to would be to clarify some points in this research. Korostelina (2007b, p.57) explains that people can have three different concepts of national identity:

1. *An ethnic concept* in which people “perceive their nation as built around core ethnic community into which ethnic minorities must assimilate”.
  
2. *A multi-cultural concept* grants equal rights to all ethnic groups the country, and the state allocates the resources and the space for all ethnic minorities to maintain their heritage.
  
3. *A civic concept* offers “citizenship as a contract between the people and the state that involves rights and obligations. [Citizens] view the constitution, the rule of law, and the civic responsibility as the main features of the nation, and they see ethnicity as insignificant” (Korostelina, 2007b, p.57).

Diaspora members who live in the host countries that have civic and multicultural concepts of national identity might work towards transforming their homeland into more inclusive society whether in the time of peace or conflict. This situation applies more to

those diasporas who are minorities in their homeland or are stateless diasporas like in the Kurdish case.

### *Conclusion*

The above theoretical framework about diaspora mobilization and identity is proposed to inform our understanding of diaspora vis-à-vis identity construction while mobilizing transnationally for homeland conflicts and issues in the host country. In this research diaspora is defined as a product and outcome of dispersal and transnational mobilization by political elites engaged in social identity construction in the host country vis-à-vis homeland. A discussion of diaspora identity formation, diaspora mobilization and how these apply to the Kurdish diaspora in the United States will further theoretical framework of this research.

Diaspora identity forms in the intersection of homeland and hostland. The degree of salience of diasporic identity depends on the intensity of homeland conflict and issues. In the time of a crisis or a conflict in the homeland, diaspora's collective identity becomes salient. A diaspora community has a common identity and attachment to a real or an imagined homeland. It maintains social boundary by deliberately resisting assimilation in the host country. Thus, diaspora constructs its social identity in relation to host society and attachment to the homeland. Like any other identity group, its existence depends on the Other. Kurdish diaspora already defines its identity according to the Other that exists in the homeland (e.g. Turks, Arabs, and Persians).

Diasporas that live in multicultural societies tend to incorporate the multicultural aspects of host country's national identity into their identities. In such cases, they are

likely to embrace coexistence in the homeland with the Other, and play a constructive role in homeland conflict. As such, the Kurdish diaspora in the United States has integrated American values of pluralism, democracy, and human rights into their diasporic identity. Kurdish diaspora in the United States constructs and reconstructs a diasporic identity that can be characterized as a mixture of the homeland, host country, and diaspora experience. This hybridity reflects in the hyphenated identities (e.g. Kurdish-American, Asian-American, Italian-American etc.). Diaspora identities are not static; that is, they are constantly negotiated.

The Kurdish diaspora in the United States mobilizes when it is fellow ethnic group faces physical violence. Because of the absence of Kurdish nation state, Kurds perceive structural violence in their homeland. The statelessness and perceiving threat to the identity play a role in the Kurdish diaspora's identity formation. This perception of threat to identity group in the homeland enhances diaspora solidarity and potential for mobilization in the host country. Thus, as is in the Kurdish diaspora case, the member of identity group gather around diaspora organizations which play an important role in identity formation and diaspora mobilization for the homeland.

Collective identity bridges social capital of diaspora. Therefore, when there is a call for mobilization, shared social identity and diaspora organizations mobilize Kurdish diaspora in the United States. Mobilization takes place mostly in reaction to critical events in the homeland and the way these events are framed by the diaspora political elites. Diaspora organizations and diaspora elites connect with the Kurdish community through social media and other means of communication to inform the diaspora members

for collective action in reaction to homeland conflict. Having said that, the opportunity structures in the host country should be present for mobilization. Even though the United States has always supported its ally Turkey in the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, the political opportunity structures have been open to Kurds for mobilization.

Furthermore, the identity is an important element of mobilization, but it does not alone suffice. As it was explained above, diaspora organizations and political entrepreneurs need to exist to frame the homeland issues to trigger mobilization. Thus, once the political space and the cognitive awareness of diaspora are present, the mobilization takes place. This can be seen in recent Kurdish diaspora mobilization efforts ranging from solidarity rallies for Kobani, ISIS attacks on Yazidi Kurds in Iraq to recent curfews in the Kurdish cities in Turkey.

Beyond this, cyberspace allows Kurds to reformulate their identity towards more unified one across the globe. It also removes the limitations of physical space where they can communicate transnationally without interference, contest, and negotiate the differences and heterogeneity of the Kurdish diasporic identity in particular and Kurdish national identity in general.

### **CHAPTER 3: BETWEEN THE HOMELAND AND HOSTLAND: KURDS AND FORMATION OF THE DIASPORA**

In order to understand how the Kurdish diaspora formed around the world and in this case, in the United States, one should be familiar with the historical background of the Kurds. The Kurdish fight for an independent country dates back to the mid-nineteenth century of the Ottoman era. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire following World War I, Kurds were not able to carve out an independent nation state. The historic Kurdish land was partitioned across the four nation-states of Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran. There are also significant numbers of Kurds scattered around the Caucasus, Central Asia, Europe and North America. However, the traditional Kurdish homeland occupies the crossroads above mentioned, pitted against “four of the most aggressive and expansionary nationalisms in the modern world” (Ignatieff cited by Eliassi, 2013, p.21). Not having their own nation-state, Kurdish history in the last century has been an experience of denial of identity, structural violence, economic and relative deprivation, political violence, expulsion, and forced migration (Eliassi, 2013, p.22). Even though this research focuses on the Kurds of Turkey (Northern Kurdistan), a summary of the situation of the Kurds in other parts of Kurdistan (Southern Kurdistan, Rojava, and Rojhilat) will be provided because when Kurds speak of Kurdistan, they refer to imagined greater Kurdistan.

## **Kurds in Turkey (Northern Kurdistan)**

The foundation of the Turkish Republic was based on a monolithic Turkish national identity. All minorities, including Kurds, within the borders of the new republic were considered Turks. Under Ottoman rule the Kurds and the Turks had the same social and religious category under the “millet system.” With the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, Kurds joined the Turkish nationalists under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk and fought side by side with Turks in the War of Independence. A shift from the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Ottoman Empire to the nation-state of Turkey which denied recognition and expression of the Kurdish ethnic identity and resulted in the creation of Kurds as the “other”. The proposed Turkish national identity was theorized by Ataturk and presented as a common identity including all minorities within the borders of the new Republic. The current Turkish and Kurdish identities have been formed through Turkish assimilationist policies and Kurdish resistance towards these policies for almost a century.

After the establishment of modern Turkey as a nation-state, Kurds, the largest minority group in the new nation-state’s territory, were perceived as a danger to the success of the Republic. Thus, Kurdish language, culture, and organizations were immediately banned, and assimilationist policies were put in place to Turkify Kurds and other minorities.

According to the ethnic nationalist ideology developed by Ataturk... all citizen of Turkey are Turks. Determined efforts have been made to realize a nation-state with a single



ethnic identity. Inonu, right hand and successor of Ataturk expressed the official position: ‘we are frankly nationalist... and nationalism is our only factor of cohesion. We must turkify the inhabitants of our land at any price, and we will annihilate those who oppose the Turks’ (Jongerden, 2001, p.81)

However, Kurds did not agree with the assimilationist policies and the exclusion of their identity from the new monolithic nation-state. Eighteen uprisings took place against the monolithic nation state of the new Republic between 1924 and 1938. The first Kurdish uprising came shortly after the establishment of the nation-state of the Republic of Turkey. The Sheikh Said Rebellion (1925) and the Dersim Rebellion (1938) have significant importance in the memory of the Kurds and for the national Kurdish movement today. The Turkish state brutally suppressed both of these rebellions. A large number of Kurds were subjected to resettlement policies in predominantly Turkish areas. These rebellions were associated with the foreign involvement in carving up the new Republic like its predecessor the Ottoman Empire. The Kurdish rebellions and the memories about how the Ottoman Empire dissolved become the basis for what it has been called “Sevres Syndrome” which can be described “as a trauma that hinders Western states’ secret agenda of dismantling Turkey’s territorial integrity” (Baser, 2015, p.54).

In the new Republic, Kurds were denied rights. In the founding of Turkey, The Treaty of Lausanne only recognized non-Muslims as minorities. All Muslims, including Kurds, regardless of their ethnic identity were considered Turks. The bond of citizenship was based on territory. Therefore, all minorities were expected to assimilate into the

majority. The aim was to create a homogenous nation state, which required assimilating the Kurds. The young Republic of Turkey denied the existence of the Kurdish identity, and state officials claimed Kurds were “Mountain Turks”.

After the brutal suppression of the 1938 Kurdish uprising, the Kurdish political movement went through a period of silence until 1970s. Only then did the Kurdish political movement become active again (Gunes, 2012). Kurds started demanding cultural political, and linguistic rights in more mobilized and organized form. The rights of the Kurds were advocated for by several organizations including Turkish Workers Party, trade unions, revolutionary student movements such as Dev Genc and the Revolutionary Eastern Cultural Hearts (DDKO) (Baser, 2015, p.56). The establishment of the DDKO is important because it reactivated the mobilization among the Kurds in Turkey. Baser quoting White (2000) notes that the foundation of these groups was significant because it “switched the Kurdish movements from a tribal character to an urban educated Kurdish activism with a leftist tone (Baser, 2015, p.56). These organizations were seeking political engagement through civil society. However, the 1971 military coup in Turkey changed the way and the means that Kurdish political movement would use thereafter. Several members of Kurdish organizations were arrested, tortured, and sentenced to long terms in Turkish prisons. This brutal suppression was a turning point for the members of Kurdish political movement because they came to understanding that without the armed struggle it would be impossible to resist the brutality of the Turkish state. The establishment of the PKK came about after this realization.

The military coup d'état of 1980 in Turkey further increased the suppression of the Kurds. All Kurdish organizations were banned and military control of the Kurdish areas was increased. The new constitution prepared under the shadow of the military coup banned public speaking of the Kurdish language. Any publishing in Kurdish and all cultural productions such as music were prohibited by law (Baser, 2015, p.56-57). These strict measures by the Turkish state and the armed struggle that the PKK took on in 1984 against the repression of the Turkish state caused Kurdish migration to other countries as refugees or asylum seekers.

#### *The emergence of the PKK*

The last and the most effective Kurdish struggle has been the one started by the PKK in 1984 against the Turkish state. The PKK emerged out of the trend of revolutionary leftism of the 1970s in Turkey. Kurdish political activists were initially part of the Turkish leftist movements, and they drew attention to the economic and political inequalities in Turkey. These activists separated from the Turkish left and formed a group under the leadership of Abdullah Öcalan. This group of activists officially established the PKK, which brought the Marxist-Leninist approach to the Kurdish issue. The goal was to establish an independent Marxist Kurdish state.

The PKK started waging war against Turkish state oppression in 1984. The initial intention of the Kurdish rebels was breaking away from Turkey and creating an independent nation state of Kurdistan. "This movement was born by economic deprivation, social injustice and physical displacement as well as ideas of ethnic identity,

all of which combined in the late 1970s to create the conditions for revolt” (McDowall, 2000, p.404).

From the very beginning of Turkish Republic, the existence of the Kurds as distinct ethnic group has been denied and this denial led to many conflicts. A little over three decades after the Turkish Republic was founded, a British diplomat observed, “I did not catch the faintest breath of Kurdish nationalism which the most casual observer in Iraq cannot fail to notice” (Marcus, 2007, p.13).

Ocalan and his PKK leadership left Turkey for Syria before the military overthrow the civilian government in 1980. Syria and Lebanon provided refuge for the leadership of the PKK. The PKK opened training camps and started training its militant there. By 1983 the PKK expanded its activity to territories in neighboring Iraq and Iran. In 1984 the PKK began guerilla warfare against the Turkish state with the ultimate goal of the liberation of the Kurds and Kurdistan. The Turkish government saw these attacks as activities of a “bunch of bandits”. By the end of the 1980’s, the PKK was able to draw the full attention of the Turkish government and the entire population of Turkey by attacking security forces and government officials using guerilla tactics. The Turkish government, unable to identify guerilla forces, started committing reprisal attacks against innocent civilians. The Turkish state repression on civilians drove more Kurds to the PKK, which allowed them to recruit more militants and mobilize the masses (Romano, 2006, p.50-51).

In order to deal with the PKK’s armed and violent struggle, Turkey took several repressive measures including the “Regional State of Emergency Governorate” (OHAL)

in predominantly Kurdish inhabited region and opening the door for gross human rights violations and many extrajudicial executions by the Turkish security forces. OHAL restricted basic rights in the Kurdish region. Turkey also introduced one of the most corrupt security measures, the Village Guard System, recruiting from Kurdish tribes and villagers to fight the PKK. Turkey, after the United States, possessed the second largest military force of any NATO member, and it continuously deployed its military personnel to the Kurdish region to suppress the Kurdish rebellion led by the PKK. By 1992, there were 600,000 regular soldiers, excluding the local police force, village guards, and special counter-insurgency teams, in the southeastern Kurdish region of Turkey. “The repression employed in the Kurdish regions included the destruction of thousands of villages and the forced evacuation of their occupants, mass arrests, torture, and all the curtailments of individual liberties that come with the maintenance of martial law” (Romano, 2006, p.54). The conflict reached its peak between 1991 and 1999, which is when the highest number of deaths and human rights violations occurred.

Turgut Ozal, who became Prime Minister in 1983, and later President in 1989, lifted the ban on the public use of Kurdish except in broadcast, publications, education, public institutions, and political campaigns.

However, this step towards a more liberal policy was accompanied by another step in the opposite direction, in the form of a new anti-terrorism law so broad that anyone could be arrested on the most flimsy of pretexts – the new law defined terrorism as “any kind of action . . . with the aim of changing the characteristics of the Republic” (Romano, 2006, p.55).

In 1992, Ozal proposed to deal with the PKK through formal negotiations. He even had amnesty for Kurdish guerillas in mind. However, “the hardliners and the military” refused this proposal. Ozal “was held in high esteem by Kurds in Turkey, and he appeared to be the only Turkish politician able to counterbalance the role of the military and its National Security Council “advisory” body (the MGK)” (Romano, 2006, p.55). In 1993, the PKK declared a unilateral cease-fire after heavy losses on the battlefield. It is believed that Ozal with the help of the Jalal Talabani, one of the leaders of Kurds in Iraq, brokered this ceasefire. Ocalan announced that the PKK was ready to discontinue the armed struggle. He “included a PKK condemnation of terrorism and an offer to abandon hostilities: a declaration in favor of a negotiated solution and a willingness to allow Kurdish deputies, rather than the PKK, to negotiate with Ankara on behalf of the Kurdish people; a commitment to the unity of Turkey and the rejection of separatism and a commitment to the legal democratic process” (McDowall, 2000, p.437).

A month after the initial cease-fire, the PKK extended the cease-fire indefinitely and renewed its demand: Kurds “should be given out cultural freedoms and the right to broadcast in Kurdish. The village guard system should be abolished and the Emergency legislation lifted. The Turkish authorities should take the necessary measures to prevent unsolved murders and should recognize the political rights of the Kurdish Organizations” (Romano, 2006, p.56). Ocalan chose not to mention autonomy, self-determination, or separation. On one hand, Ozal might have accepted the PKK’s demands to find political solution to put an end to the conflict. On the other hand, “it was Ozal who instituted the

above mentioned draconian anti-terror law, as well as the village guard system and the Emergency rule of the predominantly Kurdish provinces in 1987. Ozal seems imaginative enough to employ policies consisting of both carrots and sticks” (Romano, 2006, 56). Efforts to de-escalate the prolonged conflict lost hope when the president of Turkey, Ozal suddenly died of a heart attack. The first phase of the hope to end the conflict through negotiations ended in vain.

Ozal’s unexpected death and the new Turkish leaders’ unwillingness to seek a solution beyond military means re-escalated the conflict. The leaders who succeeded Ozal and the Turkish military saw the PKK ceasefire as a sign of weakness and escalated their attacks on the PKK. In 1994, under Turkey’s first ever and only female Prime Minister, Tansu Ciller, Turkish military spending skyrocketed reaching \$8 billion US dollars. “At the same time that more moderate Kurdish representatives were banished from Ankara’s National Assembly. Unexplained murders and disappearances of journalists reporting on the Kurdish issue, as well as Kurdish political party officials and intellectuals, accompanied the official state repression” (Romano, 2006, p.57).

In 1995, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq, KDP, physically cooperated with the Turkish military to fight against the PKK. Turkey also deployed massive amount of military personnel and contra-guerilla forces to the Kurdish region, which forced the Kurdish guerillas to shift their warfare tactics. Instead of the large scale fight scattered around large areas, the PKK turned back to hit-and-run guerilla warfare “reminiscent of its early days in 1980s” to prevent heavy loses (Romano, 2006, p.57).

The Turkish-Kurdish conflict de-escalated once again in 1999 when the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan (also known as Apo) was captured in Kenya while he was on the run to find a country willing to grant him asylum or sanctuary. Ocalan left for Syria right before the military takeover of 1980 in Turkey. In 1998, Turkey deployed its troops to the Syrian border to urge Syria to expel Ocalan from Syria. Expelled from Syria and unable to find refuge, Ocalan, was captured, with the help of the United States, and brought to Turkey. He was tried and sentenced to death in 1999, on the same day that Turkey hung a Kurdish rebel leader in 1925. This coincidence (or not) engendered more hatred among Kurds towards the Turkish government. In 2002, his “death sentence was officially commuted to life imprisonment”. This shift was because of Turkey’s desire to join the European Union (EU) to comply with the EU obligation to abolish the death penalty (Celik, 2010, p.153).

In August 1999, five months after his capture, Abdullah Ocalan called upon Kurdish rebel forces to retreat from Turkey to the Kurdish region of Iraq. “The Presidential Council [of the PKK] heralded Ocalan’s announcement as a sign of the new phase in the PKK’s fight, a political step in line with Ocalan’s new approach to winning Kurdish rights by working peacefully with the Turkish government” (Marcus, 2007, p.286). The PKK had about 2,000 guerillas inside Turkey. While the members of the PKK were retreating to their bases in Southern Kurdistan (or Iraqi Kurdistan), the Turkish army ambushed the withdrawing rebels and chased them with cross border attacks, killing nearly 300 fighters.



Again, “Ocalan demanded that a number of senior PKK members, among them European spokesman Ali Sapan, turn themselves in to Turkey. Ocalan claimed this would underscore the PKK’s desire for peace. It was a strange and unpleasant demand, yet again, nobody refused. In October, Sapan and seven others turned themselves in to Turkish border guards near Semdinli [a Kurdish town on the border of Iraq]; a few weeks later another group of eight senior militants flew into Istanbul airport. They all were arrested, imprisoned, and put on trial for membership in the PKK. Ocalan’s hope for peace did not” succeed (Marcus, 2007, p.287).

However, Ocalan’s concessions to Turkey created internal problems in the PKK. Several senior commanders of the PKK were not happy with the Ocalan’s decisions, but because of the autocratic nature of the Party, they could not openly criticize their jailed leader. Instead, they left the PKK. Some formed new groups, some left for Europe, some sought refuge in the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq, and some were killed by the PKK. However, this split within the Party did not lead to the collapse of the organization. Thousands of the rebels remained loyal to the Party and Ocalan as did the Kurdish population in Turkey and the diaspora. Despite the support;

PKK sympathizers did not —or could not —believe that Ocalan had abandoned the Kurdish people and the nationalist struggle. It was not easy to think otherwise. Tens of thousands of Kurds had died fighting for the PKK and they all had parents, uncles, aunts, sisters, and brothers. To give up on the PKK was to give up on the blood of one’s relatives; to turn their backs on Ocalan was to say their sacrifices had been in vain. After

all the suffering, after all the deaths, after all the hopes, it was easier to keep believing in the PKK. And besides, when Ocalan talked about democratic rights, about Kurdish-language education, and about being treated as equal citizens, well, after so many years of bloodshed, it did not sound all that bad (Marcus, 2007, p. 291).

This suspension of the fight led the PKK to change its strategy from armed to political struggle through legal Kurdish political parties. Turkey declared the conflict resolved with the capture of Ocalan. However, the PKK and the Kurdish population intended to continue the struggle and focused on the political and democratic arena through legal Kurdish political parties. Right before Ocalan's trial, the legal Kurdish political party of that time HADEP (People's Democracy Party) won many mayoral seats by a landslide in the Kurdish region. HADEP, which shared the same supporters as the PKK, was able to mobilize the Kurdish population. Therefore, the PKK did not lose Kurdish civilian support (Marcus, 2007, p.291-292). HADEP was shut down in 2003 by the Turkish Constitutional Court for its links to Kurdish rebels. This was not the first time that Turkey closed down a Kurdish political party. Since the early 1990s several Kurdish political parties were closed down; a new one would replace the old one directly following the shutdown. However, shutting down a Kurdish political party at a time when Kurds expected the government to focus on the peaceful resolution of the conflict disappointed the Kurdish population. This disappointment led to a loss of hope for a solution with the government, and caused the reemergence of the conflict. This "negative peace period" was supposed to be fertile ground for reforms and to give politics a chance. But Turkey's unwillingness to grant any rights to Kurds led to reemergence of the

conflict in mid-2004 and spilled over into Northern Iraq once again with cross border operations to bomb PKK camps in 2007 (Celik, 2010, p.154).

In 2005 Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan delivered a speech in the largest Kurdish city, Diyarbakir and said the "the Kurdish Question is everyone's problem, especially mine. Disregarding the mistakes made in the past is not an attribute of big states. The solution lies in providing more democracy, citizen rights and welfare" (Celik, 2011, p. 251). Even though his speech neglected to mention Kurdish identity and offered the Turkish identity as conjoint identity for both Turks and Kurds, it generated grand hopes within Turks and Kurds for a peaceful resolution to the conflict (Celik, 2011, p. 251). However, in his later speeches he focused on the security of the state and stressed using the military. This "dissatisfaction and loss of hope on the side of the Kurds led to an escalation of violence. From mid-2004 to mid-2009, sporadic hostilities in the conflict-affected areas, as well as the spread of violence to the cities of western Turkey, hampered any attempt at bringing about peace" (Celik, 2011, p.251). The government's failure to implement reforms and improve human rights to solve the conflict led to a reescalation of the conflict. In June 2004, the PKK, which went through several name changes during this "negative peace period", put an end to the ceasefire and the conflict reemerged. This time another Kurdish armed group TAK (Kurdistan Freedom Falcons), which targeted civilians in western Turkey emerged. It plotted several explosions during the tourism season to hurt the Turkish tourism industry. TAK mostly acted independently, but it had links to the PKK. The conflict can be described as a low intensity conflict until 2006, but the violent clashes took place and once again the number

of deaths began to climb on both sides. This time the PKK was able to mobilize larger and more violent masses. In March 2006 when the Turkish military allegedly killed 14 Kurdish rebels with poisonous gas, violent public demonstration broke out in the largest Kurdish city, Diyarbakir. Demonstrations shut down the city for three days and targeted police stations, state owned buildings, and banks with stones, Molotov cocktails, and burning tires. The Turkish riot police suppressed the demonstrations very brutally, which did nothing to de-escalate the conflict. The PKK sympathizers pointed out they did not want the war, but in the absence of any political dialog, the government should expect these violent demonstrations (Marcus, 2007, p.295).

The conflict also became internationalized again in late 2007 with the Turkish army's bombings of PKK camps within the territory of Northern Iraq. With the intensification of violence in the post-2004 period, the State's emphasis has been on the security and the territorial integrity of the country, whereas the main dissatisfaction of the different Kurdish groups has been with what can be summarized as the slow unwilling moves of the State in the EU integration process to grant more rights to the Kurds as a group (Celik, 2011, p.251).

As part of European Union (EU) accession, Turkey allowed broadcasting in other native minority languages besides Turkish. Turkey also guaranteed protection of "the economic, social, cultural, and political rights of its citizens". These changes contributed to the democratization of Turkey and positively affected the rights of the Kurds even though the majority of the Kurds perceived these reforms as insincere. Reforms were

short to address the demands of the Kurds. Broadcasting in Kurdish was allowed in 2002. However, it took two more years to implement the law. The state-run TV station started a “weekly half hour show”, but it did not appeal to the Kurds. They already had a TV station called Roj-TV broadcasting from Denmark. Roj-TV broadcasted mostly in the Kurdish and Turkish languages. It had a sympathetic stance on the PKK. Turkish Kurdish politicians attended its programs to debate Turkey’s policies towards the Kurds. The PKK commanders connected to the TV station via telephone. “Roj-TV ensured that Kurds keep updated on the latest news at least as it relates to the PKK” (Marcus, 2007, p.297). Kurdish diaspora’s political activists in Europe have played crucial role affecting the Turkish state’s stance on the Kurdish issue by lobbying in EU institutions or by vocalizing “Kurdish voices” in Europe. European Kurdish diaspora has also been active in the media. For instance, in 2007 Roj-TV, sympathizing with the PKK, “was the main cause of tension between Denmark and Turkey. Roj-TV was allowed to “broadcast in Denmark despite demands for its closure by the Turkish state” (Celik, 2010, 165). For the first time in 2006, private television stations were allowed to broadcast in Kurdish in Turkey, but they were limited to 45 minutes programming a day in Kurdish and with many regulations making it almost impossible to broadcast. Turkey finally launched a state owned Kurdish language TV channel in 2009. This channel is very poorly structured and the programs do not go beyond state propaganda. The majority of the Kurdish population would rather watch TV stations broadcasting in Kurdish from the European diaspora or Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (Celik, 2011, p.251-252).

In 2009, the Turkish government finally launched an extensive peace initiative to tackle the Kurdish conflict. This initiative called “Kurdish Opening and later referred to variously as the Democratic Opening, the National Unity Project, and the Democratic Initiative” (Nyanen, 2013, 86). “These changes in names signify the government’s confusion, and some desperation, in dealing with a complex and deep-rooted problem. (Celik, 2011, p.252).

While the Turkish government projected to end the violent conflict and to improve democracy through the Kurdish initiative, it was full of ambiguity about what steps need to be taken. After discussing the “Kurdish Opening” in the National Assembly the Turkish government published a report regarding which issues need to be addressed and solved. Some of these issues were;

Allowing the use of Kurdish in prisons, reintegrating PKK members... who have not participated in any armed confrontations with the Turkish military, reintegrating the people in the Makhmour Refugee Camp (in 1990s nearly 12,000 Kurdish civilians crossed the Turkish border into Iraq to escape state violence against them), bringing prisons up to EU standards and closing the Diyarbakir prison, [which became symbol of brutal state torture and oppression since 1980s], rehabilitating minors involved in ‘terrorist acts’, allowing other channels besides state owned TRT to have continuous Kurdish broadcasting, empowering the local administrations, strengthening the right of freedom of expression, allowing the teaching of Kurdish language as an elective course in schools, allowing the formation of Kurdish institutes and/or Kurdish Literature departments in universities, forming “Fight Against Discrimination Commissions” which

would inspect the public and private sectors for possible discrimination cases (Celik, 2011, p.252-253).

While the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP), the PKK, and the majority of the Kurdish population welcomed the government's efforts to find a resolution for these issues, the government certainly fell short of addressing the full scope of Kurdish expectations. In order to acknowledge the government's efforts to solve the conflict, the PKK formed and sent a "Peace Group" from Northern Iraq into Turkey. This group consisted of some members of the PKK who did not engage in any armed confrontations with the Turkish armed forces and some refugees from the Makhmour Refugee Camp in the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq. The group was welcomed into Turkey on the border of the Iraq with "enthusiastic celebrations" organized by Kurdish political parties and civil society organizations. These peace celebrations resulted in reactions from non-Kurds in Turkish society. State officials later brought up cases against the members of the "Peace Group", which resulted in the return of 20 out of 34 PKK members to Northern Iraq in July 2010. "For many, this was a sign that the new positive era in Kurdish [conflict] has ended once again (Celik, 2011, p.254).

The "Peace Group" brought letters from the PKK addressing the demands of the Kurds. These were;

Disclosing Ocalan's road map [which imprisoned leader of the PKK handed over to prison prosecutor explaining his understanding of how this conflict should be solved] to the people and along with possible negotiators, halting military operations, allowing

freedom of the Kurdish language, developing democratic social organizations and political representation associated with Kurdish identity, abolishing the village guards system and bringing an end to the Turkish military's "special operations" in the region, and preparing a new democratic constitution. They requested that these be contingent upon a real democratization of Turkey and the Kurdish people's free will. They should be reached by dialogue and discussion and allowing Kurds to lead a free and equal life within the society on the basis of their Kurdish identity – under constitutional guarantees, as a part of the democratic nation of Turkey (Celik, 2011, p.254).

As many expected the Turkish government responded that they would not negotiate with "terrorists". This response from the government ended the "Kurdish Initiative" and the conflict escalated once again.

The fight between the PKK and Turkish military broke out once again and resulted in heavy losses on both sides making 2011 and 2012 the bloodiest years since 1990s. Massive arrest of Kurdish activists, politicians, and journalists went hand in hand with violent clashes. "The government returned to a security-centered approach with" the Prime Minister Erdogan accusing the Syria's President Bashar al-Assad of supporting the PKK to escalate the violent conflict. "It soon became apparent to both [the Turkish government and the PKK] that the security approach would once again prove fruitless and costly" (Nykanen, 2013, p.88).

Towards the end of 2012 the negotiation process was launched and termed the "Imrali Process". Imrali is an island in Turkey where the leader of the PKK Abdullah Ocalan imprisoned. The Imrali Process was to negotiate to find a peaceful resolution for



the conflict. It aimed ending the hostilities on both sides and disarming the PKK in return for reforms improving the rights of Turkey's Kurds. Ocalan proposed a three staged road map for peace including "ceasefire, withdrawal of the PKK from Turkey, and final disarmament. Unlike the "Kurdish Initiative" in 2009, the "Imrali Process" received "unprecedented amount of initial support from different circles and parties across Turkish society. Kurdish political actors welcomed the process with optimism. "An influential regional Kurdish leader", Massoud Barzani announced the full support of the process (Nykanen, 2013, p.89-90). The actors of these peace negotiations have been the imprisoned leader of the PKK, the Turkish government, and the pro-Kurdish political party Peace and Democracy Party (BDP). BDP joined the newly structured pro-Kurdish party HDP in 2014.

Delegations consisting of members of the Turkish Parliament from the Kurdish HDP visited Ocalan in Imrali Prison to lay ground rules for negotiations until March 2015. On February 28, 2015, representative of the Turkish government and deputies of the HDP who took on the mediator role announced a 10-point framework regarding how to proceed in the peace process. However, President Erdogan soon after announced that he was not informed about this framework; thus, he did not recognize it. President Erdogan's attitude put a halt to the peace process.

Finally, right after the June election results came in, the deputy prime minister from AKP government who has been in charge of running the peace process said on national TV, that the HDP from now on only can make "a film of the peace process." He announced, "the peace process has been taken into deep freezer". Even though it was not

explicitly stated, the reason the AKP government was putting an end to the peace process was its failure to gain a parliamentary majority in June election. The rise of the pro-Kurdish HDP cost the AKP its majority in parliament. The breaking point of the process came with a suicide bomb attack on a group of activist en route to Kobani in the Kurdish town of Suruc by ISIS in July 2015. Also, a group affiliated with the PKK killed two police officers blamed for helping ISIS members in the same town.

The Turkish-Kurdish conflict resumed once again and has been taking place mostly in the city centers in the Kurdish region. This time the war has been affecting more civilians than ever before. Neither the PKK nor the Turkish government shows willingness to go back to the negotiating table.

The effects of the conflict are seen in diaspora as well. The narratives around peace and the peace process have been shifted to the conflict. This is demonstrated even in cultural gatherings such as Newroz. In previous years when the peace process was ongoing, the focus of the cultural gatherings was about promoting Kurdish culture. However, now it is more about Turkish state brutality against the Kurds. The Kurdish diaspora in the United States has been mobilizing for the homeland at this critical moment more than in the past couple of years.

Over the course of the four-decade long conflict, a significant number of Kurds migrated in search of a new place of residence either inside or outside of Turkey. Those who left Turkey became more politicized in their host countries. It seems the dream of having a nation-state of their own haunts them everywhere, and they have been active actors of the conflicts in the homeland through providing financial resources and human

capital as well as lobbying and raising awareness in their countries of residence. The diaspora's efforts for the raising the awareness of Kurdish nationalism and the struggle for independence are often fueled by the homeland conflict.

### **Kurds in Iran (Rojhilat)**

Like Kurds of Turkey, Kurds in Iran have been subjected to assimilationist policies of the state as well. Kurds represent the third largest population group after Persians and Azeris in Iran. They are the largest ethnic group that resists the Iranian governments' centralist policies. During World War II, Kurds of Iran caught an excellent opportunity when British and Soviet forces occupied Iran. The Kurdish Republic of Mahabad was founded and Qazi Muhammed became its president. However, the republic did not make it to its first anniversary. Without support from the Soviets, Kurds were not able to resist Iranian forces.

Kurds supported the Islamic Revolution in Iran led by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 with the hope of structural changes regarding their political status. It did not take a long time for Khomeini to direct Iranian forces to suppress Kurds. Intense fight broke out between Kurdish parties, the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDK-Iran), the Revolutionary Society of Iranian Kurdistan's Toilers (Komala), and the Iranian government. According to Wahlbeck more than fifty thousand Kurds died, and nearly three hundred Kurdish villages were destroyed in this conflict between 1979 and 1992 (Wahlbeck, 1999, p.58). The Kurdish region of Iran became a militarized zone during

the Iran and Iraq war, and foreigners were not allowed to travel to the area (Wahbeck, 1999, p.58). Human rights violations and summary executions have continued to this day.

The Kurdish opposition in Iran lost their leaders, such as Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, in political assassinations, became fragmented and lost its ability to continue the fight to stop Iranian oppression of the Kurds (Prunhuber, 2009). Eliassi points out that the Kurdish region of Iran is “the most impoverished area of Iran, which has forced many Kurds to immigrate to major Iranian towns and western countries” (Eliassi, 2013, p.27). Political oppression combined with economic deprivation over the course of decades caused Kurds to leave their homeland and form diaspora in Western countries.

The demands of the Kurds for an autonomous Kurdistan in Iran have been rejected by the Islamic Republic. Thus, it would be far-fetched for the two Kurdish political parties in Iran, PDK-Iran and Komala to make an agreement to obtain autonomy for the Kurds without a regime change.

### **Kurds In Iraq (Southern Kurdistan)**

After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the World War I, Britain established a monarchy in Iraq and became the colonial ruler of this new country. Kurdish populated areas remained under British occupation until 1930. Eliassi notes that “Kurds were viewed by British administrators as primitive tribesmen incapable of ruling themselves, colonial discourse that Britain has applied to many other colonies in order to justify its cultural, political, and economic dominance” (Eliassi, 2013, p.28).

Even though Kurds make up approximately 23 percent of the current Iraqi population, their relations with Iraqi government have never been good. The history of Iraqi Kurds has been filled with oppression, mass execution, genocide, deportation and chemical attacks until 1991.

In 1991, after the Gulf War, the United Nations (UN) established a no-fly zone over the Kurdish region of Iraq to protect Kurds from Iraqi airplanes and intrusions. Iraqi Kurds got another opportunity for establishing self-rule with the invasion of Iraq by the United States in 2003. Kurdish peshmargas (Kurdish armed forces in Iraqi Kurdistan) seized control of the all historically Kurdish areas. In 2005 with the new constitution, Iraq established a federal system and Kurds autonomously rule the Kurdistan Region. Since then the Kurdish region has been one of the most stable territories in Iraq. However, the current stability of the region has been shaken up by attacks from Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIS) since June 2014. The economic boom of the Kurdish autonomous region lured many Iraqi Kurds to move back to Kurdistan from the diaspora. The Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) desire to establish a strong government has been a major concern for the central Iraqi government because they fear that the KRG is preparing to break away from Iraq.

In June 2014 when IS took control over the second largest Iraqi city of Mosul, the KRG seized control of the disputed Kurdish city of Kirkuk. With the annexation of the oil rich city of Kirkuk from Bagdad and the successful Kurdish fight against IS, Kurds are on the brink of declaring an independent State.

### **Kurds in Syria (Rojava)**

The Syrian Kurdish population was estimated at over 9 percent of the Syrian population before the Syrian civil war at about two million (Hassanpour and Mojab, 2005, p.214). Unlike the mountainous geographical characteristics of the rest of Kurdistan, the Syrian Kurdish region is a plain. Therefore, geography has been considered one reason why Kurds of Syria have not waged an armed struggle against the Syrian governments up until 2011. The Ottoman Empire ruled Syria until World War I. Between the two World Wars, Syria was a French colony until the withdrawal of French troops in 1946. Adopting Pan-Arab ideology upon gaining independence, the new Syrian regime denied rights of the Kurds and other minorities within Syria. Especially after the nationalist Baath Party came to power, Kurds were subjected to Arabization policies. Over 120,000 Kurds were stripped of their citizenship and classified as foreigners creating a stateless population within Syria (Tejel, 2009, p.50; Hassanpour and Mojab, 2005, p.219).

The Baathist policies towards Kurds have been similar to other countries that rule over other parts of Kurdish inhabited areas. Kurds of Syria have been subjected to the denial of education, employment, dehumanization and displacement (Eliassi, 2013, p.34; Tejel, 2009, p.60-68).

The wave of the Arab Spring reached Syria in early 2011. The nation wide resistance was initially brutally suppressed by the Bashar al-Assad regime. This brutality led to more uprisings. Peaceful protests eventually transformed into armed resistance, and thus since March 2011, Syria has been the battleground between fragmented armed

opposition groups, and the al-Assad regime. The divide between countries supporting Assad's regime and opposition further complicates a solution in the near future for the Syrian civil war.

To discourage Kurds from uniting with the mostly Sunni Arab opposition, the Assad regime promised citizenship to those Kurds who had been deprived of their citizenship for the past fifty years. By giving their citizenship back, the regime hoped Kurds would not support the uprising. Even though Kurds of Syria did not align themselves with the Syrian Arab oppositions, they were united against the al-Assad regime (Eliassi, 2013, p.34-35).

Since 2012, Syrian Kurds under the leadership of have been a game changer in the Syrian civil war and in the fight against the Islamic State (IS/ISIS). The Assad regime pulled its troops out of major Kurdish areas in 2012. The PYD filled this power vacuum immediately. This led to the establishment of an autonomous region in Rojava. The PYD has been ruling and militarily defending the Kurdish region of Syria. Kurdish forces have been trying to keep the Kurdish region out of the Syrian civil war.

In addition to the KRG, establishment of another autonomous Kurdish region worries Turkey because of its own approximately 20 million Kurdish population. Therefore, Turkey has opposed the establishment of an autonomous region in Syria and refers to PYD as terrorist organization. PYD and its armed wing Peoples Protection Units (YPG-male units / YPJ-female units) rose to prominence with their fierce fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra. Both of these extremist groups have been aided by Turkey (Gunter, 2014, p.37).

Because of the Syrian civil war more Kurds have been dispersed from their homeland. ISIS has been waging attacks against Rojava since the summer of 2013. Because of the attacks of the ISIS, nearly 200,000 Kurds sought refuge in Turkey. The city of Kobani was attacked by ISIS in September 2014, and it became a symbol for Kurdish resistance. ISIS was defeated in the outskirts of the city with the help of the Kurdish Peshmergas transferred through Turkey to Kobani and US airstrikes and airdrop of military hardware. The battle of Kobani was also a turning point for the Kurds of Turkey. First, Kurds of Turkey have several relatives on the Syrian side of the border and they expected the Turkish government to provide support to their relatives in the fight against ISIS. However, the Turkish government especially the Turkish president wanted Kobani to fall into the hands of ISIS. Even though Turkey let the Peshmergas enter the city from Turkish soil, Turkey has demonstrated an unwillingness to help Kurds against ISIS. YPG/YPJ proved to be the most effective fighting force against ISIS. Most of the Kurdish inhabited areas in Rojava have been cleared of ISIS. The cantons of Rojava declared a federally administered region as of March 2016.

From the above analysis, one can say that Kurdish immigration away from the homeland is caused primarily by the political and economic deprivation they have faced in their historical land by ruling nation-states. In other words, Kurdish Diasporas in Western countries have been formed as a result of the violent conflicts to declare a Kurdistan. These Diasporas around the globe have developed complex interactions between each other. These interactions created a triadic relationship “including the home countries, host countries, and transnational diaspora communities” (Alinia et al, 2014,



p.53-54). These new connected diaspora communities have always been mobilized around the issues and events in homeland. Therefore, they have transformed the conflicts occurring in Kurdistan into transnational struggle.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Qualitative Research Method**

This research adopted the qualitative research methodology because this method collects its data from participants who experience the issue or the problem under investigation.

Creswell provides several characteristics of the qualitative research method. First, the data is collected “by actually talking directly to people and seeing them behave and act within their context” (Creswell, 2014, p.185). Second, qualitative researchers gather information themselves and do not rely on a single source, so they collect data through multiple sources such as documents, interviews, and observations. Third, researchers use inductive and deductive data analysis in which researchers inductively build their patterns, categories, themes from the bottom up by organizing the data into increasingly more abstract units of information, and then they deductively “look back at their data from the themes to determine if more evidence can support each theme or whether they need to gather additional information” (Creswell, 2014, p.186). Next, the qualitative researchers focus on learning the participants’ meaning of the problem or issue. The process in qualitative research is emergent, which allows that the initial plan may change in response to data collected. Lastly, the researcher’s personal background, culture, and experience may alter the direction of the study. Because of above-mentioned

characteristics, the qualitative research method was the appropriate design for this project to gather data to investigate the research question. What are the perceptions of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict among Kurdish diaspora members in the United States and what types of political mobilization do they engage in?

### **Data Collection**

The method of data collection is open-ended and semi-structured interview questions. The interview questions asked the participants to convey their experiences in the diaspora and how they and the “diaspora entrepreneurs” frame homeland issues/conflicts and traumatic experiences of dispersal for political mobilization in host countries.

The interview questions were open-ended and semi-structured because the research questions require in depth responses to capture the participants’ multi layered diasporic experience. “Questionnaires and interviews are very widely used social research methods of collecting data from and about people” (Robson, 2011, p.235). This format was selected because I rightly assumed that a structured interview might prohibit participants from expanding upon their experiences and how they frame them. Open-ended questions were important for gathering a large amount of information since they allowed participants to speak at length.

The longest interview was an hour and ten minutes. The shortest interview was thirty-four minutes. The average length of interviews is slightly over fifty minutes. The total number of interview questions was eight with two sub questions. However, over the

course of the interview, some additional questions were promptly asked to participants if any further clarifications were needed.

Over the course of the interview, I took hand written notes. When participants answered the questions in Turkish or Kurdish, I translated these parts into English later on. I avoided writing down any identifiable personal information. I assigned different Kurdish names to each participant to preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants. I assigned different Kurdish names to each participant to preserve the ethnic/national identity of the participants that they felt strongly about it.

Beyond the interviews, I attended several rallies and cultural events organized by the Kurds in Washington, DC, New Jersey and New York City to observe the Kurdish diaspora in mobilized form and to have casual conversations with the Kurdish diaspora community to make sense of why and when they mobilize. Also, the current events about the conflicts in the Kurdish regions were followed in the media. Several social media platforms were regularly monitored to see how diaspora members interact in cyber space even though interaction in cyber space is beyond the scope of this research.

## **Sampling**

For the sampling, the purposive sampling technique with some aspects of snowballing was used. Purposive sampling is primarily used in qualitative studies and “may be defined as selecting units (e.g., individuals, groups of individuals, institutions) based on specific purposes associated with answering a research study’s question” (Teddlie and Yu, 2007, p.77).

The snowball technique allowed me to reach out to participants from different circles. This has increased the representation of the research, which allows me to generalize the research findings. Some of my initial research participants connected me to other participants taking the role of gatekeepers. This technique ensured participants trust in the research and the researcher. I also reached out to Kurdish diaspora organizations through social media and e-mails, and they connected me to the participants.

I interviewed a total of 21 participants. Six of these interviews were conducted over Skype upon the request of the participants because of their work and personal schedule. Interviews took place between August 2015 and February 2016.

The participants determined the place of the interviews. I met some participants at a café on their request. Some participants preferred their office. I conducted Skype interviews on my laptop from my home where no one was present. Four of these participants connected to Skype from their homes two of them skyped from their offices. The language of the interviews was mainly English. However, during the interview sometimes participants switched to Turkish or Kurdish. Since I speak both of these languages I allowed the participants express themselves in the language that they feel most comfortable.

The fieldwork for research was carried out between August 2015 and February 2016. A total of twenty-one open-ended qualitative interviews were conducted. The youngest participant was in his mid 20s and the oldest participant was in his early 60s. Even though at the beginning the research intended to capture a gender balance within participants, this intention was not accomplished. Four out of twenty one participants

were female. Since the research does not focus on the gender, this feature has been considered unimportant. Nine of the participants are U.S. citizens, three did not disclose, and the remaining nine are permanent residents. The research focused on the core members of the Kurdish diaspora members age eighteen and above. The profession of research participants was not asked to prevent the revelation of identifiable information.

16 out of 21 research participants had a college degree. One of these college graduates had a PhD degree. Eight of the 16 participants had master's degrees in fields ranging from engineering to political science. The seven remaining college-educated participants only had Bachelor's degrees. 10 of the college educated sample earned their bachelor's degrees in Turkey and the remaining six earned their bachelor's degree in the United States. Four out of 21 participants had some college education and only one participant was just a high school graduate.

The average number of years that all participants lived in the United was almost 13 years. The shortest number of years that one participant lived in the U.S. was four years and the longest has been in the U.S. for 38 years.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

In this research thematic coding is used to analyze the data because thematic analyses pays the greatest attention to the qualitative aspect of data. This method will provide an opportunity to constantly compare the emerging themes and codes. Thematic coding is “a generic approach to the analysis of qualitative data” (Robson, 2011, p. 474). This method provides flexibility to analyze the large amount of qualitative data.

When analyzing the data an inductive approach has been taken. In an inductive approach the themes identified are strongly linked to the data themselves. As Braun and Clark (2006) stated, since the data was collected specifically for this research, the identified themes may bear little relationship to the interview questions. Themes also are not driven by the researcher's theoretical preconception. However, the researchers cannot free themselves completely from theoretical commitments (Braun and Clark, 2006, p. 11-12).

As Braun and Clark (2006) suggest for an inductive approach, the data of this research is coded in the process without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame. Therefore, analyses of this research have been data driven. Thematic analysis provides the ability to richly describe the data.

Furthermore, to go beyond semantic content of the data, latent thematic analysis is used. Latent thematic analysis not only examines the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualization, but it also informs the form and meaning of the data (Braun and Clark, 2006, p. 13). Therefore, the themes involve interpreting the work.

This research has taken a constructivist approach, which believes that meanings and experiences are socially constructed and reconstructed in contrast to being inherited within individuals. Therefore, thematic analysis of the data from the constructivist perspective helps to theorize the socio-cultural contexts and structural conditions of latent themes.

When analyzing the data, I took the following steps proposed by Robson (2011).

First, I familiarized myself with the data. Second, I generated initial codes. Third, I identified themes. Fourth, I constructed thematic networks. Finally, I interpreted themes to produce the final analysis. The analysis required constantly moving back and forth between the entire data set and themes and the analysis of the data.

### **Validity, Strengths and Weaknesses of the Research**

One of the strengths of the qualitative research method is validity, meaning the accuracy of the data must constantly be checked through several validity strategies. First, the triangulation of different data sources of information was checked to build coherent themes. Second, “member checking” was used to determine the accuracy of the data by asking the specific descriptions or themes back to participants. Thus, it filled the void of not conducting follow up interviews. Third, discrepant information was presented to counter the themes to build a case for the themes. Fourth, the researcher attended several rallies and cultural events organized by the Kurdish diaspora to observe the diaspora in a mobilized form to validate the narratives of participants. Fifth, a “rich, thick description” was used to interpret the data. The detailed description and different perspectives of the themes strengthened the validity of the findings (Creswell, 2014, p. 201-202).

Like any other research methods, this research has its strengths and weaknesses. First of all, the size of the sampling can be considered a weakness. This research was conducted with a small amount of participants from the Kurdish diaspora community in the United States. Sampling such a small size of the Kurdish diaspora raises the question of making general statements, as it is not fully representative of the entire population.



However, this weakness was minimized by utilizing the snowballing technique to reach out to participants from different circles of the Kurdish diaspora.

Second, the identity of the researcher can be considered a weakness because research participants may give socially desirable answers. However, it turned out the researcher's identity was strength because the participants felt secure to provide candid answers to the interview questions. Also, follow up questions were asked to reveal if socially desirable answers were given.

Finally, thematic analysis might be considered as a weakness because the researcher might expect to find predetermined themes to find answers to the research questions. To avoid this, the researcher did not approach the data with predetermined expectations. The themes from the data spoke for themselves.

### **Ethical Consideration**

The data of the research is collected from people. Therefore the purpose of the research was disclosed to participants prior to the interviews and a consent form was provided. The view of the participants was respected and no judgment projected towards them. The researcher refrained from making personal comments during the interview so as not to guide the participants towards a specific answer. Anonymity of the identity of participants is secured. No personally identifiable information was written down.

The identity of the researcher overlaps with the identity of the members of the Kurdish diaspora. This overlap may cause the infusion of personal bias into my research.

Self-reflection and the triangulation of the different data sources prevented the researchers' personal bias from factoring into the analysis.

## CHAPTER 5: DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This research explores the multilayered nature of political mobilization of stateless and conflict generated diaspora and diaspora involvement in homeland conflict, peace processes and politics. How does living in a multi-cultural society affect their diaspora experience and shape their collective identity? It primarily examines the diaspora experience of Kurds from Turkey living in the United States particularly in Washington, DC, Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, New Jersey, and New York. The Kurdish diaspora mobilization for the homeland and their displacement experience in the hostland where the concept of national identity is based on multiculturalism are also taken into consideration in this research.

The data for this research was gathered through semi-structured open-ended interview questions. The data was coded over the course of the research process. Emerging themes were identified during the data coding process. The themes were categorized into major and sub-themes. The major themes are organized from the most prevalent to less prevalent one. The identified major themes are: (1) diaspora organizations, lobbying, and mobilization for the homeland (100% of participants), (2) historical memory and trauma (slightly over 90% of participants), (3) changing the perception of the other (nearly 90% of participants), (4) contribution to peaceful resolution of the conflict (approximately 80% of participants), (5) lack of a strong leader

or myth of needing a strong leader (nearly 80% of participants), and (6) fragmentations and statelessness (almost 70% of participants).

Below I will discuss these themes and their sub-themes. The logical flow of themes is based on the highest number of research participants that mentioned them. The percentage points will be provided in the discussion.

### **Diaspora Organizations and Political Mobilization for the Homeland**

100 percent of research participants pointed out the important role of diaspora organizations in bringing diaspora members together to create a unified voice to draw attention to the Kurdish issue in the Turkey. As it is stated in the theoretical framework, diaspora organizations are crucial for mobilizing the diaspora around homeland issues including intergroup conflicts. The subthemes that were coded under this theme are mostly about the functions of diaspora organizations. These subthemes are advocacy for Kurdish rights and raising awareness, necessity for mobilization/lobbying in the absence of statelessness, and maintenance of Kurdish culture in the U.S by organizing events.

21 out of 21 research participants stated that Kurdish diaspora organizations often involve in activities to raise public awareness in the United States about the ongoing conflicts and human rights abuses in Kurdistan. For example, a research participant named Zer said,

Organizations give a strong voice to try to raise awareness about what's happening in Kurdistan. When an organization requests any information about the Kurds, we provide information. We want to make sure people in America get the right information about Kurds.

The media doesn't provide accurate information what is happening in Kurdistan. Since July [2015] so many Kurdish civilians were killed in Turkey but you don't see any news on TV or newspaper. So if we don't provide information, nobody will hear about killing of civilians (**Zer**).

Another research participant reiterated the above narrative in slightly different words. For instance,

We need these organizations because of the political problems we are experiencing in Kurdistan. We always have this conscious that we need to be there for our people. We cannot physically be in Kurdistan to work for our cause and people, but at least via these organizations, we can do something. That's why I joined this organization. It is our duty to help our people in Kurdistan. By helping the people in Kurdistan at least they would feel that they are not alone. I think this is a sort of psychological support, which makes them feel they are not forgotten (**Azad**).

These narratives indicate that Kurdish diaspora members feel a collective responsibility towards their fellow ethnic group facing injustices in their homeland. That is why as a member of an ethnic group and a diaspora organizations, research participants almost always used plural pronouns to refer to their activism for their homeland. Their activities revolved around "raising public awareness" about the Kurds in the U.S.

Also, data shows that Kurdish diaspora uses a wide range of means to raise awareness about the Kurdish issues. When I asked an informant regarding how he raises awareness about the Kurds he responded with below narrative:

I talk to media. Historic things are happening there [Kurdistan] now. That's why I do everything to raise awareness. I may not be able to support my people directly. However, you can always raise awareness from afar about the situation on the ground, the injustices that have been perpetrated against the Kurds. Kurds have been treated badly by the successive governments and now by the brutal regimes and groups like ISIS. I try to raise awareness by all means I could- by social media, through talking to policy makers or by simply writing articles for mainstream media. I think it is important and a lot of people can convey that it is different when they hear a Kurdish voice. You tell them not only what they want to hear but also what is actually happening on the ground. It is important that decision makers know what is happening (**Salih**).

20 out of 21 research participants noted that diaspora organizations fill the need of the statelessness. Diaspora organizations function as an umbrella that brings dispersed diaspora members together for mobilization in the time of critical events happening in the homeland. A research participant named Helin told me:

We are already disadvantaged because of not having free Kurdistan. Also, we have a small number of Kurds in the United States. I don't know what it would be like if we didn't have any Kurdish organization here. It takes the time to mobilize when something happens, so without such organizations, it would be harder. The Kurds are scattered across U.S., so it is harder to come together in a short time (**Helin**).

Another participant named Rozerin explained the reason why she became a member of a Kurdish diaspora organization:

I joined because I wanted to mobilize Kurds living here to vote in the Turkish elections, to organize events, to reach out to the students here. I also want to bring the Kurdish community together to establish strong ties within the Kurdish community in the U.S. **(Rozerin).**

Diaspora organizations play a crucial role in mobilizing diaspora and framing the homeland issues. These roles become even more important in the case of the stateless diaspora. Through these efforts, the diaspora can influence the homeland conflict by lobbying in the host country and to international organizations to intervene in the homeland conflicts to either perpetuate or bring peace.

Diaspora organizations frame the conditions of the Kurds in the homeland into an issue that diaspora members have to work towards finding a resolution for it. The way these organizations frame the issue helps define their grievances and claims and legitimizes the diaspora mobilization activities.

Events in the homeland are necessary for mobilization of the Kurdish diaspora in the hostland. However, the way these events are perceived and framed is critical. Diaspora organizations, elites, or actors articulate the events in a way that helps mobilizing the diaspora's especially passive and silent members.

The overwhelming majority of the research participants (over 90%) expressed their desire for effective lobbying efforts. Their goal is to influence U.S policy makers

through lobbying efforts to put pressure on Turkey to stop human rights abuses against the Kurds and find a solution to the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. The lobbying actions that they have taken were “filing a petition on behalf of Kurds to the US senators”, “writing letters to their representatives”, and “seeking help from other diaspora organization”.

One participant named Rozerin explained their lobbying effort:

We are trying to reach out to politicians. For example, we had an initiative of sending e-mails to Senators. We prepared a sample letter and Kurdish community members sent it to their Senators. Some of our friends have received responses from their Senators  
**(Rozerin).**

It is hard to achieve tangible results when the diaspora is weak in terms human and financial capital. Nonetheless, persistent lobbying efforts of diaspora activists and organizations can reach tangible results in their host countries. For example, one of the oldest and long-standing Kurdish-American diaspora organization AKIN launched a campaign called “The Fast for Peace in Kurdistan and the Freedom of Leyla Zana.” Up until now this campaign has been the most influential Kurdish diaspora activism in the United States to stop injustices in the homeland. The fast on the steps of United States Capital building resulted in the floor debate in the House of Representatives about the Kurdish issue and human rights abuses in Turkey.

AKIN with its lobbying effort collected 153 signatures from members of the House of the Representatives. With these 153 signatures, a congressional letter was sent to President Clinton in October 1997 regarding the plight of jailed Kurdish member of



Turkish parliament Leyla Zana in particular and the human rights abuses committed against Kurds in general. President Clinton responded to the letter saying the State Department and the U.S. Embassy in Ankara will follow the case of Leyla Zana and pursue discussion of overall legal reform with the Government of Turkey.

Over 95 percent of research participants (20 out of 21 participants) stated that diaspora organizations help to preserve and to transmit the Kurdish culture in the diaspora by organizing cultural events. The cultural events are compromise of Newroz celebration, picnics, concerts, festivals, language and traditional dance courses, and conferences. One participant named Azad said, “through these cultural events the younger generations are able to preserve their Kurdish identity”. The diaspora organizations are seen as the guardian of Kurdish identity in the host country.

These events reproduce Kurdish culture and shape diasporic Kurdish identity in the U.S. However, the reproduction of the Kurdish culture and identity in the U.S. is influenced by the American culture and identity. Research participants did not consider this as corruption of Kurdish identity. For example, a research participant named Azad stated,

Having Kurdish organizations is important. We Kurds already have many problems and one of them is not being well organized. Also, we are learning from Americans and other people how to get organized well. You know why Americans are successful because they are organized. We need to be like them if we want have Kurdistan. I am not saying we should change our culture. I am saying we need to take good parts of other cultures to get better (**Azad**)

Diaspora organizations are mostly founded by the core members of the diaspora. Since the participants of this research were the core members of the Kurdish diaspora in the United States, the importance of establishing diaspora organizations came up in almost every interview. The Kurdish organizations that research participants mentioned which are within the geographic boundaries of this research are as follow:

**New England Kurdish Association (NEKA):** It primarily operates in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. While ISIS' attack on Kobani was still going on, a group of Kurds wearing T-shirts saying "Save Kobani" drew attention of the White House Staff at the Rhoda Island College where President Obama was scheduled to speak. The president of NEKA was given the opportunity to speak directly with President Obama about the situation of the Kurds. Even though it may be hard to predict how this might have helped the Kurds, it shows the level at which the diaspora activism operates.

**American Kurdish Association (AKA):** It is primarily based in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware. It has mobilized Kurds in New York to rally in front of the Turkish Consulate, United Nations, and Union Square. To break the silence of The New York Times reporting on the Kurds, AKA held a vigil in front of its building in New York City. Also, it organizes Kurdish cultural events such as Newroz in NJ and NY. It provides information through its Facebook page to its followers.

**Washington DC Kurds:** It is based in greater Washington Metropolitan area. It has mobilized Kurds around homeland issues to rally in front of the White House, State Department, and Turkish Embassy. It mostly mobilizes and informs the Kurds through its Facebook page.

**American Kurdish Information Network (AKIN):** AKIN was established in 1993 as a nonprofit organization to increase awareness about the Kurds in the United States. It collects, translates, and disseminates information about the Kurds. On AKIN's website ([kurdistan.org](http://kurdistan.org)) is stated that it "seeks to promote understanding between the Kurds and the Americans." It calls for a negotiated settlement to the Kurdish question, with the governments with jurisdiction over the Kurds agreeing to an open unconditional dialogue with representatives of the Kurdish people.

AKIN also calls on the United States to stop supplying weapons to Turkey. In fact, it was able to stop US arms sales to Turkey in the past. AKIN exposed the human rights abuses and Turkish repression of the Kurds. With its lobbying efforts, in 1994 Congress stopped about 10 percent of its aid to Turkey because of the exposed human rights violations in there. Also, it stopped the sale of cluster bomb and cobra helicopters to Turkey (Marcus, 2007, p.250). These have been noted as the most important accomplishment of Kurdish diaspora lobbying efforts.

This organization's latest activity has been to hold a vigil in front of Turkish Embassy in Washington, DC to draw attention to Turkey's recent crackdown on Kurdish cities. The vigil started on January 15, 2016. The Kurdish diaspora activists holding this

vigil are promoting a nonviolent struggle in Turkey to peacefully settle the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. They also expose human rights violations that are being committed in Turkey to the American public.

**Washington Kurdish Institute (WKI):** Based in Washington, DC. The WKI was established in 1996 as a nonprofit, research, and educational institution to advocate for the people of Kurdistan. It is committed to educating the public in the United States on Kurdish culture and history by producing and disseminating information. WKI has also been providing Kurdish language classes based on demand.

Its president Dr. Najmaldin O. Karim, FACS, MD was one of the most active Kurdish diaspora activists in the United States mostly focusing on the Iraqi Kurds. He testified before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1990 on Saddam Hussein's atrocities in Iraqi Kurdistan including the use chemical weapons against Kurdish civilians in Halabca. In this capacity as a President of the WKI and diaspora activist, he has written op-ed pieces for The Washington Post, LA Times, The New York Times, and some others to advocate for Kurdish rights. He currently also serves as a Governor of Kirkuk, Iraq.

**Peoples' Democratic Congress New York (HDK NY):** This is the most recent addition to the diaspora organizations. It is the New York chapter of pro-Kurdish civil society organization in Turkey. HDK was founded in Turkey in 2011 and incorporated some left leaning Turkish organizations and platforms. HDK NY can be categorized as a

transnational diaspora organization. It has organized solidarity rallies for the recent Turkish government's crackdown on Kurdish population in Turkey. HDK NY started a food aid campaign for the people of the Sur district of Diyarbakir in which nearly 350,000 civilians have been internally displaced and 250 civilians have been killed as Turkish security forces deploy tanks and heavy weaponry to urban centers to combat the PKK (Crisis Group, 2016).

It seems the heterogeneous nature of the Kurdish society reflects in the formation of Kurdish diaspora organizations in the United States. Beyond having diversity in their nature, these organizations have been situated in the United States at the regional or transnational level. Even though these organizations may not strictly draw their regional boundaries, the way they operate and mobilize is mostly in their respective regions or states.

The research data shows that Kurdish diaspora organizations in the United States have formed social networks through which in Sokefeld's (2006) words "the initiative for collective action is spread". Kurdish diaspora entrepreneurs or leaders have established organizations or associations that have created and sustained the discourse of the community and have organized mobilizing practices like demonstrations and various community events. Diaspora organizations fill the need in the absence of a nation state. Thus, affiliations with diaspora organizations in a way functions similarly to the functions of social identity.

## **Historical Memory and Trauma**

This theme emerged in slightly over 90 percent of the research participants (20 out of 21) narrative. It is in line with the diaspora's theoretical framework because diaspora is a product of a traumatic dispersal in most cases. Like other diasporas, the Kurdish diaspora in the United States seems to keep the memory of the past alive. The dispersal of the Kurdish diaspora has been mostly because of homeland conflict. The root causes of this forced displacement, anger, and victim psychology have been connected to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the historical Kurdish land was divided among four countries after World War I. During the data coding process three subthemes were identified are Sykes-Picot agreement prevented us from establishing Kurdish state, mass atrocities from the 1920s to 1990s, and telling the past mass atrocities to new generation.

20 out of 21 research participants referred the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 as being the root cause of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict and for the absence of the Kurdish nation state. The participants who did not mention the Sykes-Picot agreement mostly talked about Turkish state atrocities of the 1990s. One of the research participants' narrative perfectly captures not only this subtheme but all of them:

When I think about why we are all over the place, constantly subjected to oppression and killings and facing human rights violations, I think about the missed opportunities during and after World War I. I am talking about the Sykes-Picot agreement, which divided Kurdistan into four pieces. I am talking about Sheikh Said, Dersim, Halabca. I don't even want to go into what happened in 1990s because it is just too painful. These make me angry. If only we had a strong leader in 1920s, we wouldn't have had to go through any of

this (**Azad**).

The narratives of these traumatic memories start with the Sykes-Picot and continue to the 1990s. The Turkish-Kurdish conflict intensified in the 1990s and human rights abuses in Turkey were at its heights. The majority of Kurdish diaspora members left Kurdistan in 1990s. Therefore, the memories of violent conflict of the 1990s are vivid in the narratives of Kurdish diaspora.

20 out of 21 research participants stated the past Turkish state atrocities against the Kurds. The words that describe these past calamities are in the vocabulary of almost all Kurds. For example, “Sykes-Picot agreement,” “Sheikh Said uprising of 1925,” “Dersim Massacre of 1938,” “Chemical Gassing of Halabca,” and “state atrocities of 1990s.”

The current generation grew up listening to Turkish state brutality against their group. Therefore, the younger generation seems to take a more radical stance against the Turkish state. A few of my younger research participants pointed out that if Turkey is not going to accept Kurds as equal to the Turks and reconcile their past atrocities, there is no need to make peace.

For example, one of my interviewees indicated;

In the 1990s we were forced to move to city where we didn't have anything. My father got arrested for just being Kurdish. He was tortured. It was hard to recognize him when he got out. He never wants to talk about what happened. But I can guess what they did to him. I am not going to forget this until the state formally apologizes to my father and the

other Kurds that had a similar experience (**Ramazan**).

19 out of 21 participants stated that they want to make sure they tell these past atrocities to their children. Preservation and transgenerational transmission of these past traumatic events and linking them to the current situation of the Kurds is what Volkan (1997) called “chosen trauma”. “Chosen trauma” can be defined as a shared mental representation of the past calamity that a group experienced (Volkan, 1997, p.48). A past moment that caused a trauma in a group’s memory causes intergroup conflicts if the group does not reconcile it. It seems the core members of the diaspora have kept this traumatic experience of their ancestors alive in their memory and hope to reverse the plight of the Kurds one day to establish a nation state of their own. Also, in some narratives of Kurdish diaspora these past atrocities have become a marker of their identity. For example,

We don’t want to forget what happened to us from Dersim massacre [1938] to Halabca, to Roboski [(in 2011 34 Kurdish civilians were killed by the Turkish airstrikes on the border of Iraq and Turkey)] to Kobani. I need to make sure my kids know about them. If they know about them they will remember who they are. They will remember their Kurdishness (**Zêr**).

These painful sufferings that were inflicted on the Kurds remain in the collective memory. This representation of the past atrocities has become a part of the collective identity of the Kurds. Taking the social identity theory of intergroup behavior into



consideration, these memories might affect the conflict behavior or conflict readiness of the Kurds. Certainly, when constructing Kurdish ethnic and national identities, these traumatic memories provide the foundation for identity construction. These memories might be more salient in diaspora because they are considered a major cause of transnational dispersal. Thus, these traumatic memories of the past must be addressed when trying to resolve the Turkish-Kurdish conflict.

### **Changing the Perception of the Other**

Nearly 90 percent of research participants (18 out of 21) referred to this theme. This theme is important for resolving intergroup conflicts because the perception of the other in intergroup dynamics affects conflict behavior of the ingroup and outgroup or readiness for conflict. I identified three subthemes in the data: Turks see Kurds as backward people, Kurdish diaspora changes perception of Turks, and Kurds are distinct people.

18 out of 21 research participants (approximately 90%) stated that Turks perceive Kurds as backward people. In the interview narratives Kurdish diaspora members make favorable comparisons with the outgroup that Turks have prejudices and biases against the Kurds. These prejudices are being carried out to the diaspora by the Turkish diaspora as well. Some research participants experienced these unfavorable projections towards them by the Turkish groups in the United States. For example, a research participant named Jiyan stated in the interview that,

The Kurdish problem is wider than what we think. At a psychological level, the way Kurds are perceived by the Turks is very negative. Turks perceive Kurds as culturally, economically, and socially backward people. When I interact with Turks in America, they still have the same approach toward us (**Jiyan**).

This negative perception of the Other was well captured in a very comprehensive survey report in Turkey in 2011 by KONDA Research and Consultancy. This report is important for this research because the prejudices and biases that groups possess in their homelands are carried to the diaspora and they cause intergroup conflicts at home and abroad. Considering the role of the diaspora in homeland conflict perpetuation or resolution, changing the perception of the Other in the diaspora towards the other would be crucial to find a sustainable peace for the homeland conflict.

The report was entitled “Perception and Expectations in Kurdish Issue”. The numbers on the perception of the Turks and Kurds towards each other are worrisome given to the fact that conflict was in a latent stage when the survey was conducted in the summer of 2010. The report revealed that nearly 58 percent of the Turks did not want to have a Kurdish spouse. In contrast, only 26 percent of the Kurds did not want to have a Turkish spouse. Furthermore, slightly over 47 percent of the Turks surveyed did not want a Kurdish neighbor. In contrast, only slightly over 22 percent of the Kurds did not want a Turkish neighbor (Konda, 2011). These numbers might be even higher now because of

the resurgence of the conflict and the current perceptions that the pro-Turkish government media, which Freedom House labels as not free,<sup>2</sup> creates towards the Kurds.

However, nearly 80 percent of participants (16 out of 21) stated that Kurdish diaspora changes the perception of Turks in the diaspora and Turkey. The narratives of the participants shows that Kurdish diaspora engages in changing this negative perception of Turks towards Kurds through social media and other means of communication. They believed that to solve the Turkish-Kurdish conflict this negative perception has to be transformed. One of the research participants who was also familiar with the KONDA's research stated that,

To solve the Turkish-Kurdish problem we have to change the perception of the Turks towards the Kurds. Without changing this perception, a solution will not be permanent. This is supported by the KONDA's research. I think Kurds living the United States can help change this perception through public awareness campaigns whether in social media or through Kurdish organizations in Turkey (**Azad**).

Furthermore, another participant had a similar approach and stated that Kurdish diaspora activism helps change the perception of the Turks towards the Kurds.

Kurds living in the United States I think are able to break this perception. Let me tell you how. I believe when Turks see Kurds living in the United States and accomplishing things in the United States and staying involved with Kurdish issue destroys Turkish

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<sup>2</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2015/turkey>

perception of the Kurds. Because they think Kurds cannot accomplish or adapt to the society. Breaking this perception will help to solve the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. I think Kurds living in the United States play a major role in breaking the perception of the Turks against the Kurds. When I post our demonstration on Facebook, I receive several negative comments from Turks about what we are doing in the US. Sometimes Turks are so surprised that there are Kurds in the US. Sometimes they are even surprised that Kurds can speak English. Going back what we contribute, we have received very positive feedback from the Kurds living in Kurdistan. I think in the events holding a sign with even a word Kurd on it helps raising awareness about the Kurdish situation in back home. I think we break some walls here in the US towards the Kurds. We have to show them that we share the same basic human values and we are not different. I think they don't know us, so I have to educate them about us to solve this problem. All they know is otherness or we are different from them (**Jiyan**).

From the above narratives it can be inferred that diaspora might help changing this negative perception even though it might be hard to measure how much Kurdish diaspora plays a role.

12 out of 21 research participants (nearly 60 percent) stated that Kurds are distinct people in the Middle East. Also, participants attributed the better qualities to their distinct ethnic community of Kurds by making favorable comparisons towards their ingorup. For example,

Kurds are distinct from the rest of the ethnic communities across the Middle East. They

happen to be more open minded and secular in a way, so that is out of norm for many governments whether the Turkish government, Iraqi, Syrian, or Iranian government and the other people of the Middle East (**Salih**).

Furthermore, research participants described the other ethnic groups in the Middle East to explain how Kurds are distinct. Some of those descriptive terms are “Kurds are not Arabs or Turks”, “you wont see Kurds oppressing anyone”, “Turks can’t tolerate other people”, “Turkish history is full of violence” etc. Like any other identity group, existence of the Kurdish identity depends on the Other.

These perceptions have been created over the course of a century long Turkish-Kurdish conflict. Volkan described this situation as “when a group is in continuing conflict or even at war with neighbor group, members become acutely aware of their large-group identity” (Volkan, 1997, p.25). It seems the diaspora members posses these perceptions of the other even living away from home for a long period of the time. Thus, when involving diaspora in peace processes altering the perception of Other of diaspora members should be taken into consideration.

### **Contribution to Peaceful Resolution of the Conflict**

Measuring the diaspora’s influence over homeland conflicts or the hostland government is one of the most challenging tasks. However, taking the efforts of the diaspora communities into account one cannot deny by any means that diaspora communities have an influence over the homeland conflicts. 16 out of 21, which

corresponds to approximately 80 percent of research participants stated that they believe in the peaceful resolution of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. They also stated that they believe Kurdish diaspora plays a constructive role in the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. The remaining of the participants expressed that they were not sure whether Kurdish diaspora plays a role or not.

This theme confirms the assumptions that the diasporas who live in multicultural societies tend to play constructive role in the homeland conflicts. The subthemes that emerged in the data reinforcing this theme were voting in Turkish parliamentary elections, pushing for more democratic government in Turkey, and influencing U.S. policy makers to find a peaceful resolution for the conflict.

In my field research, 16 out of 21 my informants originating from Turkish Kurdistan stated that the most effective way for them to support the struggle in the homeland is by voting for the pro-Kurdish Party HDP or by mobilizing the diaspora to vote for the HDP. For example, a participant named Arin said:

2015 elections were a great way of contributing to the Kurdish struggle in Kurdistan by voting in the elections and mobilizing Kurds to vote. We demonstrated that we have a capacity to make an impact on the elections results. I believe politics opens a space for dialogue. That's why I wanted to be more active in politics during elections. Our hope is to solve the Kurdish issue through political means. The elections gave us an opportunity to even mobilize some Kurds who weren't even aware of their Kurdishness (**Jiyan**).

This participant is whom the diaspora theoretical framework classifies as core

member of diaspora that mobilizes the dormant or silent members of diaspora. The reason the participants was if the number of the members of Turkish parliament that advocate for the peaceful resolution of the conflict is higher, Turkish government could not ignore their demands for peace. They believed politics could transform the conflict towards peaceful resolution.

However, despite being supportive of a peaceful resolution, some participants voiced their skepticism regarding whether the Turkish government is pro-peaceful resolution with their current policies. The current Turkish government sees the pro-Kurdish HDP as a threat to its political victories. HDP thrived during the peace process because of the constructive role it played during the peace process to find a resolution to the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. Thus, eventually its rise resulted in AKP failing to gain the majority in June 2017 elections after consecutive political victories over a decade.

Looking at the elections results of the June 7 and November 1 in Turkey, it seems the Kurdish diaspora had an influence over the results. However, measuring how much influence that Kurdish diaspora in the United States had on the results is hard to ascertain. In the June elections once the diaspora votes were proportionally distributed. HDP won one more seat in the Turkish parliament. HDP at the time was still a party that has been negotiating peaceful resolution of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict before AKP government terminated the peace talks. The diaspora's support for HDP can be an indicator of the Kurdish diaspora in the United States advocating for a peaceful resolution of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict.

I conducted my interviews around the same time when pro-Kurdish HDP scored a victory in the June 7, 2015 parliamentary elections. The four major parties in the Turkish parliament failed to form a coalition government. Therefore, the Turkish president called for early elections held on November 1, 2015. This long period of elections might have influenced the research participant's thinking. Despite this influence, some research participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of changing the plight of the Kurds through political means. For example, a participant named Reşo stated:

I am involved with this political organization because I believe the Turkish-Kurdish conflict cannot be solved with violence. I believe we can find a way to solve the problem through peaceful means. That's why I support diaspora organizations and political mobilization of Kurds here. Seeking peace takes a long time but it is more effective for long-term solutions... That's why we need a strong Kurdish party in the Turkish parliament. Since we can vote from here, I want to make sure I vote for HDP. I think HDP is going to do something. At least this way I can say I do something for my people [Kurds]. **(Reşo)**.

Another way that research participants thought they contribute to the peaceful resolution of the conflict was pushing for more democratic Turkey. 14 out of 21 participants believed a more democratic or decentralized Turkey would end the conflict. This subtheme is in line with what Kurdish political movement and the PKK have been advocating for. This subtheme very intertwined with the supporting the For example, a research participant named Kendal stated:



Considering the reality of the Kurdish situation, establishing a free Kurdistan would be a long and a bloody process. I wish the states dominating Kurdish land could become more democratic and recognize Kurds as a distinct ethnic community and recognize their rights by giving them political autonomy within existing boundaries (**Kendal**).

A slightly over 50 percent of the research participants expressed that the Kurdish diaspora has a minimal contribution to the resolution of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. However, they still believed the diaspora should increase its mobilization in the United States to inform U.S. policy makers about the situation of the Kurds in the Middle East. For example, a participant named Amed stated:

I think our contribution to resolving Turkish-Kurdish conflict is minimal, but at least we contribute something and inform Americans and policy makers about the situation of Kurds. I think with enough pressure from the West whether through media or policy makers would eventually force Turkish government to resume the peace process again. We already proved that we want to resolve this [(Turkish-Kurdish conflict)] peacefully. I think Kurds are tired of seeing violence (**Amed**).

During the peace process, the Kurdish diaspora was adjusting its demands and expectations for the peace process. Despite the decade long conflict, forced migration, injustices and grievances that diaspora members endured, they wanted to leave those behind and focus on a peaceful resolution. They believed the parties negotiating peace

would eventually address the Kurdish peoples' grievances.

### **Lack of a Strong Leader or Myth of needing a Strong leader**

Nearly 80 percent of the research participants (16 out of 21) of the participants stated that Kurds need a strong leader in their struggle. At the beginning of the research, this theme was not expected since in the case of the Kurdish struggle in Turkey, Abdullah Ocalan has been accepted a de facto leader by the majority of the Kurdish population. When coding the research data, two subthemes were identified: lack of leadership prevented Kurds to unite and a leader that could reach to everyone.

16 out of 21 research participants stated that Kurds were unable to produce a strong leader when the Ottoman Empire dissolved after World War I to rally Kurds around the idea of nationalism to establish a nation state. Research participants supported this theme with a historical narrative like the following one:

At the advent of the spread of nationalism and at the fall of Ottoman Empire, Kurds did not have a strong leadership to unite different element of the Kurdish society under one roof. So the lack of leadership prevented Kurds to unite different elements of the Kurdish society. Kurds have so many different religious sects and affiliations so bringing all of these groups would be hard without a leader. Now is more challenging because Kurds living in four major countries have different national identities. They have become a little bit more like the majority of people live in those countries be it Arabs, Persians, or Turks **(Kendal)**.

Following Freud's theory of group psychology that focuses mainly on the groups rallying around the leader to identify with one another, Volkan (1997) explains the psychology of large groups, which illuminates why the research participants narrated this theme. Volkan uses the analogy of a large canvas tent. The canvas of the tent represents the large group identity (or collective identity) and the tent pole represents a leader that holds the large group together and protects the group. The leader prevents the perceived threats to the large group. Thus, members of the group want a strong person to lead them. "In a way, man is a horde animal desiring membership in a strong group led by a strong leader" (Volkan, 1997, p. 27-28). This explains why the overwhelming majority of research participants attributed the fragmentation and dispersal of the Kurds to a lack of a strong leader.

Furthermore, 14 out of 21 participants stated that Kurds were unable to produce a leader that could reach to everyone to create a nation state. For example, three of my research participants stated this subtheme as such;

Because of this fragmentation, a leader that could appeal to everyone has not emerged. A leader that not appeals to everyone but also a leader that was able to reach to every corner of the society has not emerged (**Siyar**).

A leader that could unite all the Kurds would empower them striving towards forming a nation state (**Rozerin**).

Not having a good leadership is a major reason why Kurds do not have a nation state of their own (**Agit**).

Emphasis on strong Kurdish leadership has been a narrative of the PKK since its inception. It seems constructing this narrative around leadership has become an integral part of Kurdish national/ethnic identity. Attributing the fragmentation and absence of nation state of the Kurds to a lack of leader seems to be socially constructed by the political entrepreneurs and organizations to rally the masses behind them. Thus, this construction secures the position of power for the political entrepreneurs.

### **Fragmentations and Statelessness**

Almost 70 percent of research participants (14 out of 21) referred to this theme in the interviews. Research participants linked the fragmentation and statelessness to lack of a strong leadership. A lack of strong Kurdish nationalism was stated the major cause of fragmentation and statelessness. The subthemes that were coded in under this theme are Kurds are not nationalist enough, too many political divisions and tribalism, what happens to us is because of not having our country.

14 out of 21 research participants stated that if Kurds were “good” enough nationalist, they would have established a country of their own long time ago. This “weak” nationalism was connected to individuals’ having multiple social identities. Their tribal, religious/sectarian, and linguistic identities were considered weakness. It seems that research participants expected that Kurds should have a salient ethnic or national identity at all times until either an independent Kurdistan is established or Kurds fully gain their political and cultural rights. The following paragraph is an example of common perception among the Kurdish diaspora in the United States.

Strong regional affiliation (tribalism), linguistic divide, and sectarianism prevented Kurds from forming a unified voice to carve a nation state of their own from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire after the World War I. The colonial powers at the time, France and the Great Britain's lack of support for the Kurds led to the official division of the Kurdistan among four states, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. The Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 among France, Great Britain, and the Russian Empire roughly draw the borders of the Modern Middle East. If the Kurds only cared about their Kurdishness we would have had our own country by now. We would not have to live in other countries. I may have not even left Kurdistan. But I am here now I want to work towards ending the suffering of the Kurds in Kurdistan. I think we are leaning how to be good nationalists (**Agit**).

Research participants' references to the fragmentation are not only because of the tribalism, linguistic divide, and sectarianism but also it is as a result of political divisions among Kurds. 12 out of 21 participants stated that the political divisions are obstacle to independent Kurdistan. These political divisions have surfaced in the diaspora as well. The major divide within Kurdish diaspora in the United States is categorization of the diaspora members according to the countries that Kurds came from –Turkey, Iraq (Kurdistan Regional Government now), Iran, and Syria. This fragmentation breaks down to different political parties or groups within those countries. For example, Kurds who emigrated from Iraqi Kurdistan are either supporters of KDP or PUK. The reflection of these political divisions can be seen among diaspora organizations. The majority of the

Kurdish diaspora organizations may collaborate when organizing events or rallies. However, the fragmentation is apparent. The research participants considered this fragmentation problematic in the absence of a nation state. They voiced the desire to unify Kurds at least to begin with in diaspora.

One of my research participants noted:

Kurdish society is divided by the religious sects and linguistic differences-Kurmanci, Sorani, Zazaki, Gorani/Hawrami speakers and shia, sunni, alevis, yazidis (**Kendal**).

Two other research participants were even more explicit regarding fragmentation of the Kurds:

Kurds are not united. Even within one country there are several Kurdish groups. In other words, the fragmentation of Kurds is one reason that Kurds don't have a country (**Xemgin**).

The main reason that Kurds don't have their own country is their disunity not only geographically but also politically Kurds don't have their unified national discourse. We have to over come this first. I see some people even make these distinctions here [in the United States] (**Salih**).

Despite the concern of research participants regarding the fragmentation of the Kurds, societies, groups, or diaspora - as it was mentioned in the theoretical framework- are not homogeneous entities. Thus, this fragmentation of the Kurdish

society and diaspora should be seen as a natural phenomenon.

12 out of 21 research participants stated that what happens to us is because of not having our own country, or to say it in one word: statelessness. Hannah Arendth (2004) described statelessness as the loss of national citizenship. The majority of the Kurds hold the citizenship of Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. However, in this research, statelessness is not limited to formal citizenship. It refers to the self-conception of those who perceive themselves as stateless despite holding a citizenship.

Struggling with the statelessness, stateless diaspora rely on the diaspora organizations and the collective memories about their “imagined nation”. These collective memories do not stay in the homeland when individuals move to another country. They are transmitted to new generations. The “imagined nation” is constructed through these collective memories, which sometimes may be an inaccurate representation of the past. They have created a historical consciousness of individuals about their “imagined nation”. These memories are not passive; in fact, they are constantly reframed and reconstructed for political action (see what “they” did to “us” or what “they” may do to “us” in the future).

One of my research participants stated that what has happened and what is happening now is because of this statelessness:

“Kurds have faced all the problems and atrocities because of the statelessness. If we had a state would all the killings have happened? I don’t think so. When you look at the history of the Kurds for past century, it’s a history full of mass killings of the Kurds by the states

that control Kurdistan. When we listen to our elders about the past, they still look horrified. I don't want to forget what happened to us. I want to tell them to everyone" (Heval).

Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of the research participants also referred to human rights abuses and the denial of their identity as due to their statelessness.

"The reason we are facing so much injustice in our land is not having our own country. We are being denied basic human rights. We can't even be Kurds in Kurdistan now. If we are being denied these rights why do live for. This is how many of us feel. So then we wonder why there is Kurdish uprisings. When you look at the curfews being enforced in Kurdish cities, killing of prominent human rights activists like Tahir Elci, Ankara bombing of HDP rally, of course you think if we had a country these things wouldn't happen" (Aras).

From above the narratives, one can say that diaspora members see their statelessness as a cause of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict.

What can a stateless diaspora do when the homeland conflict becomes manifest? As the research participants attested, the absence of a state puts more weight on the diaspora community to raise awareness about the homeland conflict. If the host state has unfavorable policies towards the diaspora community, the frustration may be directed toward the host state as well. However, in the United States the Kurdish diaspora has never engaged in any violence in the host country despite the United States being



supportive of its ally Turkey in the fight against Kurds. My research participants expressed that even though the United States has been supportive of Turkey so far, it started realizing, especially with the emergency of ISIS, that Kurds might be the best ally of the United States in the fight against ISIS. Kurds need to be better in diplomacy to gain the full support of the U.S. against Turkey as well.

## **CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

At the beginning of the research, since there was not any previous research on the Kurdish diaspora in the United States, I was wondering if the Kurds in the United States could even be considered diaspora let alone their influence on the homeland conflicts and issues. However, throughout the research process and data collection, as it was explained above, Kurds in the United States fit into the description of the diaspora framework that was explained in the theoretical section of this research. In this section taking into consideration the emerging themes, first, the research will further draw on theoretical discussion, then it will conclude the research, and finally it will close the chapter with the recommendations and the future research.

Since 1990s, one of the driving forces of Kurdish nationalism has been the diaspora. It has been striving to end the statelessness of the Kurds by establishing a Kurdish state. This has not been only the desire of the Kurdish diaspora in the United States; in fact, European Kurdish diaspora has been more active in this sense. This goal helps the Kurdish diaspora remain focused on the plight of their fellow ethnic members in their homeland and involved in the politics of the states they have dispersed from. The diaspora members who Anderson (1991) called “long distance nationalists” are influenced by homeland conflicts and policies or peace processes as they move on with their daily lives in the host countries.

Diaspora is socially constructed through discourses about transnational political community that mobilizes for the homeland mostly in the time of critical events in the homeland. While the Islamic State continued its attacks on the city of Kobane in Syrian Kurdistan, Kurdish diaspora across the world mobilized to raise awareness regarding the plight of the Kurds in the region by asking for help and support from the international community.

The Kurdish diaspora played an important role in disseminating the messages from their homeland. However, these messages were not generating any help from the international community and this was not the first time. As my interviews attest, mobilization around homeland conflicts has become an integral part of Kurdish diaspora identity.

Kurds who have left their imagined homeland of Kurdistan often act on calls for national solidarity. November 1, 2014 was declared “World Kobane Day” and rallies were held in more than 30 countries around the world. This was the first time Kurds from all parts of Kurdistan and around the world rallied for a joint cause. They not only intended to draw attention to the IS attacks on Kurdish towns, but they also wanted to show solidarity with their fellow Kurds in the homeland. In the United States thousands of Kurds and their friends gathered in Washington, DC and New York. A former member of the Syrian Parliament, Mustafa Muhammad a native of Kobane went on a hunger strike in Washington, DC.<sup>3</sup> In Germany, thousands of people gathered in Stuttgart in support of Kobane and simultaneously there were sit-ins in front of the European

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2014/12/20/us/kobani-activist/>

Parliament in Belgium, public demonstrations in front of the Dutch Parliament in the Hague, airport invasions in Stockholm, Paris and London, and hunger strikes in various countries which gathered support from first, second and third generation Kurds. In addition, fund-raising events managed to raise a significant amount of money to help the victims of the atrocities and deportations. The concern of research participants about weak Kurdish nationalism seems in reality has made a shift towards collective and stronger form of Kurdish nationalism.

Knowing the role that diaspora has played in Turkish-Kurdish conflict, the imprisoned leader of the PKK Abdullah Ocalan called on Kurdish diaspora to gather at a conference to discuss the peace process. The intention was to involve diaspora in the development of peace process and to involve international institutions and governments. As a result, two conferences were organized in Brussels, the first one in December 2013 and the second one in December 2014 with attendance of Kurdish diaspora from various countries. Kurdish diaspora has been an important actor in the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. This role seems to be recognized by the Kurdish political movements.

Politicized diaspora's transnational activism has been a bounding feature of the Kurdish diaspora. The Kurdish diaspora in the United State as a non-state actor and stateless diaspora engages in political activism through diaspora organizations and political parties originating in their homeland to influence their hostland government's and global institutions' policies favorably towards the Kurds. The focus of these rallies has been human rights abuses, mass killings of the Kurds by the repressive regimes, and minority rights. The focus on minority rights is important to draw the attention of

hostland governments and the public especially in a host country where the concept of national identity is based on multiculturalism.

The diaspora community can shrink or expand in the light of homeland events. The peace process, the Kurdish fight against ISIS, the rise of the HDP in Turkey, and the recurrence of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict have triggered a *diasporic turn* and expanded the core members of the Kurdish diaspora in the United States. At Kurdish events such as Newroz the number of the participants have tremendously increased over the past three years. Some participants despite living in the United States for a long time, only in past three years have been participating to the events organized by Kurdish diaspora organizations.

The efforts to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict failed in July 2015. Both Turkish and Kurdish sides have not showed willingness to go back to the negotiation table. This new landscape has affected the diaspora as well. Consequently, the Kurdish diaspora in the United States has shifted its role of focusing on the peace process to advocacy and informing the American public and government about the plight of the Kurds and the Turkish-Kurdish conflict.

As it was stated, the diaspora adjusts its position according to homeland events. The homeland conflicts shape the diaspora politics and the theme of the cultural or political events organized by the diaspora. For example, Newroz in 2014 was focused more on the ongoing peace process at that time between the Turkish government and the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan. However, the dominant theme of the Newroz in 2015 was the Kurdish fight against the Islamic State and the Rojava. Also, conversations

were revolving around the upcoming the parliamentary elections in Turkey and the rising of the HDP and its popularity even among the Turkish population. Several left leaning Turks joined Kurds at the Newroz celebration due to the political climate in Turkey. However, with the war starting again, the shift has been towards the expressing concerns about the Turkish government's crackdown on Kurdish cities.

Finally as the research participants attested the narratives of violence and traumatic dispersal from the homeland because of the conflict comprise of centrality of the diaspora's identity formation. Even in the individual cases when the dispersal of a diaspora member was not traumatic and was not result of the violence, it seems diaspora members keep referring to a collective violence that their fellow members of "imagined community" had faced.

### **Recommendations**

Governments and NGO's should analyze positions and the impact of the diaspora in conflicts and the peace processes. Designing peace processes without inclusion of the diaspora may not bring about a sustainable peace because the diaspora should be included as a party to the conflict. Thus, peace designs should be multi track interventions. Scholars and practitioners should keep in mind that contemporary conflicts are multi leveled and multi issued. Multi track diplomacy might be able to address all the issues that parties fight about and bringing in all parties involved or who have a vested interest in the conflict.

Diaspora is both an internal and external actor that has influence over homeland conflicts directly by providing human and financial support and indirectly by lobbying the host country government to influence its policies towards their homeland. Thus, diaspora voice should be included in the settlement of the homeland conflict. Also, heterogeneity of the diaspora should not be ignored. All subgroups and diaspora organizations should be included in the peace process.

Knowing these diaspora dynamics, during the short-lived Turkish-Kurdish peace process, the Kurdish diaspora was actively informed by the Kurdish political party in Turkey. As it was mentioned above, with a suggestion from the jailed leader of the PKK Kurdish conferences were organized in Europe to assess the reaction of the Kurdish diaspora to the peace process with the Turkish government.

Also, the representative of the Kurdish party made several trips to the United States to meet up with the Kurdish diaspora. As the research participants attest, the diaspora was supportive of the peace process. Despite recurrence of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, the Kurdish diaspora in the United States still supports the peaceful resolution of the conflict. However, the diaspora expects that the political and economic oppression that caused their grievances must be addressed.

Furthermore, the function and interest of diaspora that are related to their identity, status, and power should be taken into consideration given to the role they can or may play in homeland conflicts and peace processes. Diaspora may be concerned about how the reconciliation in the homeland will affect their identity and interests in the host

country. Overall, diaspora should be treated as agents having both homeland and hostland at the center of their identities, interests, and motives that pursue diverse goals.

### **Future Research**

The future research on the Kurdish diaspora in the United can focus on two different aspects of diaspora: the identity formation of the second generation diaspora and a comparison of the Kurdish diaspora in the United States to a more active Kurdish diaspora in a European country where there is a rising trend of prejudice and biases towards migrants.

The first recommended research might reveal whether the Kurdish diaspora's second generation still maintains the salient Kurdish identity compared to the first generation whose members were dispersed from their homeland because of the homeland conflicts and injustices.

The second recommended research should focus on comparing a diaspora where national identity of the host country is based on multi cultural concept (e.g. the United States) to a country where the national identity is based on ethnic concept (e.g. Germany).



## **APPENDIX**

### **Interview Questions**

#### **Background information**

1. What is the country in which you were born?
2. What is the highest level of education that you have received?
3. What is your age?
  - 18-25
  - 25-40
  - 40-65
  - 65-above
4. How long have you been in the United States?
5. What is your country of citizenship?
6. Why did you leave your country of origin?

#### **Social Identity, Political Mobilization, and Narratives**

1. How often do you participate in Kurdish community events?
2. How often do you visit your family and friends living in Kurdistan and have you thought about moving back? Please explain.

3. How important is it for you to know what is going on in Kurdistan and in Kurdish community in diaspora?
4. What do you think is the main reason why Kurds face discrimination in their homeland?
5. In your opinion what are the reasons that Kurds do not have a nation state of their own?
6. Are you a member of any Kurdish party/organization? If yes, why did you join it and what are the means of communication? a) In your opinion what have the Kurds living in the United States contributed to the Kurdish struggle in Kurdistan?
7. Do you provide your support to the people in Kurdistan and raise awareness in the US regarding injustices and human rights abuses happening in homeland?
8. Have you ever participated in any rally protesting the countries that rule over Kurdistan? If yes, what is the level of your involvement in these protests and why? a) Do you think the Kurdish issue might be resolved any time soon?

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