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# **THE KURDISH DIASPORA IN EUROPE: IDENTITY FORMATION AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM**

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## ABSTRACT

*The “Kurdish question” has become one of the most protracted conflicts in Turkey’s recent history, and perhaps even the most serious problem facing the Turkish Republic today. It is also one of the most pressing issues affecting Turkey’s prospects for accession to the European Union. Despite recent developments in the Kurdish-Turkish bargaining process, considered by many to constitute significant leaps forward, Turkey still has a long way to go in reaching a stable, democratic resolution of the long-standing, deeply-embedded, and complex issues that concern the country’s Kurdish minority. While Kurds in Turkey continue to make demands of the Turkish government, Diaspora Kurds in Europe also participate in this claims-making process by following alternative strategies at the local, national, and supranational level. As van Bruinessen noted approximately a decade ago, the Kurdish question is no longer a concern solely for countries in the Middle East, but, due to the Kurdish Diaspora, has increasingly become a European debate.*

*In light of its activism and visibility in Europe, the Kurdish Diaspora has been extolled in several studies for being the “best-organized diasporic community in Europe.” As a result of labor migration, political turmoil, and conflicts in Turkey, many Kurds have become dispersed throughout Europe and beyond. Today, it is no surprise that Kurdish Diaspora adopts strategies in order to raise their collective voice in Europe, to attract attention to their cause from European governments, politicians, and civil society groups, and as part of their struggle to be recognized ethnically and culturally as “Kurds” – firstly in Europe, and then in Turkey. In the European countries where they reside, Kurds maintain and reconstruct their Kurdish identity and use the opportunities available in their new host countries to mobilize their movement. Employing these strategies, the Kurdish Diaspora, at the local, national, and supranational level, has leapt at the opportunity to influence the course of politics within both Turkey and Europe. Above all, this study is an attempt to map out the Kurdish Diaspora in Europe and to analyze its historical development. Secondly, it is an attempt to understand the mechanisms of how and why the mobilization of Kurds occurred in Europe, by examining the movement’s scope of influence as well as its limitations. Finally, the Kurdish Diaspora’s stance towards the AKP and the “Kurdish Initiative” are examined in detail. The purpose here is to shed light on the Kurdish Diaspora, its reach and influence, and its connections to the Kurdish movement in Turkey.*

*“This is nationalism without a bounded sovereign space – a nomadic nationalism through which Kurds cultivate and communicate EuroKurdishness and Euroversality.”*

-Nevzat Soğuk

## 1. Introduction

This research paper is an attempt to better understand the political activism of the Kurdish Diaspora. As a result of labor migration, political turmoil, and conflicts in Turkey, Kurds have become dispersed throughout Europe and beyond. Kurdish communities can be found throughout numerous countries in Europe today, and they constitute a highly heterogeneous group: an amalgam of disparate classes, ideologies, and religious affiliations. Their collective experience includes stories and memories of oppression, labor migration, earthquakes, exile, poverty, torture, forced displacement, conscientious objection, discrimination, and xenophobia; in essence, a constant struggle for survival and identity preservation and reformulation. Various Kurdish migrants, along with their offspring, have kept their attachments to their places of origin, and maintain a feeling of “nationalism from afar” that engenders their contribution to the Kurdish cause in Turkey. Today, it is no surprise that many Kurds in Europe adopt strategies in order to raise their collective voice in Europe, to attract attention to their cause from European governments, politicians, and civil society groups, and as part of their struggle to be recognized ethnically and culturally as “Kurds” - firstly in Europe, and then in Turkey.

I begin this paper by mapping out the basic features of the Kurdish Diaspora in Europe. Drawing upon the historical formation of the Diaspora and its current status in Europe, I examine the profiles of the Diaspora members as well as the factors that facilitated their political mobilization in their host countries and allowed them to engage in the Kurdish cause irrespective of restraints imposed by national borders. I try to do this by first

outlining the formation of the main Kurdish migrant organization, the Association of Kurdish Workers for Kurdistan (commonly referred to by its Kurdish acronym, KOMKAR), and then by explaining how the PKK has begun to dominate the Kurdish nationalism debate in Europe.

In the second part, I look at the heterogeneity of the diasporic community through an examination of their relations with other Kurds from Iran, Iraq, and Syria, as well as with Turks who live in Europe. It is important to highlight the diversity of ideas that can be found within the Diaspora community while focusing on the common agenda which unites the majority of the Kurdish groups. Moreover, its relationships with other Kurdish groups from the Middle East as well as with Turkish Diaspora communities are integral to the boundary-making and boundary-maintenance mechanisms of the Kurdish Diaspora.

The third part focuses on Kurdish political activism, protest, and propaganda strategies abroad. In the European countries where they reside, the Kurds maintain and reconstruct their “Kurdish identity,” using opportunities available to them in their new host countries to mobilize themselves. Owing to these opportunities, the Kurdish Diaspora, at the local, national and supranational level, has leapt at the opportunity to influence the course of politics in both Turkey and in Europe. I first lay out the main groups that lobby institutions and politicians, then, I focus on the host country’s political opportunity structures and their relations with Turkey in order to shed light on the impact and limitations of the Kurdish lobby in Europe. In the last part of this section, I provide insight into the Diaspora’s approach to the AKP’s policies towards Kurds, especially the “Kurdish Initiative.” The opinions of a diverse cross-section of the Diaspora relating to two subjects, TRT 6 and the September 12, 2010 referendum, are then studied in detail.

In addition to the extant academic literature on the subject, I benefited from Diaspora websites, blogs, and newspapers. Furthermore, in writing this paper, I have also drawn upon interviews with first and second generation Kurdish Diaspora members, which I conducted in Sweden and in Germany between January 2010 and March 2011. This

fieldwork has formed a part of my on-going PhD thesis, which concerns the Turkish and Kurdish Diasporas in Germany and Sweden. In total, I conducted more than 50 semi-structured interviews in Sweden and close to 40 in Germany with first and second generation members of the Kurdish Diaspora. Many of the Diaspora members I interviewed were activists in Kurdish organizations or belonged to the youth branches of these organizations. Other participants in this study contributed to the Kurdish movement through blogs, columns, books, movies, or music. All participants were somehow active in Kurdish Diaspora circles, meaning, for example, that they participated in protests and demonstrations in support of Kurdish causes. Finally, I interviewed Kurdish politicians who were active at the local, national and international level.

This paper adopts the meaning of “Diaspora” as that given by Rogers Brubaker (2005: 5), who suggests it can be defined by three core elements: a) a dispersion in space; b) an orientation towards the “homeland,” real or imagined; and c) boundary-maintenance vis-à-vis a host society. Therefore, one can say that a Diaspora is not a natural result of mass migration, and that Diaspora communities are not synonymous with migrant groups. Diasporas are composed of certain members of immigrant communities who maintain their ties to the homeland and possess a strong sense of belonging towards it, regardless of whether it is an existing country, an imaginary one, or “one in need of being saved.” They demonstrate this sense of belonging by actively participating in the host society’s political and/or social spheres. They seek to become involved in the politics of the homeland and favorably affect decision-making processes surrounding their cause in both their home and host countries. They try to improve the political and social conditions (in according with their own conceptions) in a country to which they may never return. In the following pages, therefore, our focus will be on the members of the Kurdish transnational community who meet these criteria.

## 2. Mapping the Kurdish Diaspora

### *Historical Formation and Current State of the Kurdish Diaspora*

The Kurdish migration to Europe can be divided into three categories: economic, environmental, and political. While Kurdish intellectuals and students had begun to arrive in Europe prior to the 1960s, Kurdish mass migration became noticeable only after this decade. At that time, the majority of Kurds who migrated mainly did so for economic reasons, similar to many Turkish workers. As they held Turkish nationality when they arrived, they have typically been lumped in with “Turkish migrants” in the literature. In addition to labor migration, several earthquakes in Turkey, such as the ones that struck Muş in 1966 and Muradiye-Van in 1976, also contributed to the Kurdish migration to Europe (Baran 2010). In addition, numerous Kurdish students came to Europe to study. Finally, and most importantly, Kurdish migration to Europe occurred in response to political crises and events, such as the state’s repression of both ethnic and religious minorities (for example, in the case of the Alevi Kurds), the 1971 military intervention, the 1980 *coup d’état*, clashes between the Turkish army and the PKK, and forced mass migration. Therefore, we have identified three significant migratory flows related to economic, environmental, and political conditions to keep in mind while analyzing the profile of the Kurdish Diaspora.

The change in status from “guest worker” to “asylum seeker,” especially after the 1980s, is of great significance when one looks at the political activism of Kurdish communities in Europe. The literature usually ignores the earlier two flows (economic and environmental) and tends to label the Kurdish community as a “conflict-generated,” “exile,” or “victim” Diaspora, which ultimately paves the way for a perception of Kurds in Europe through this one-dimensional lens. There is a corresponding tendency to focus on the Kurds who arrived after the 1980s, and especially after the 1990s, when scholars and researchers worked on activism in the Diaspora. One reason for this phenomenon may be that the emergence of a vibrant and prominent Diaspora is detectable only after these dates (Ayata 2011: 21). However, this fact should not lead us to rely on conceptions that eschew the complexity of the Kurdish population in Europe.

Kurdish immigrants as a whole constitute a heterogeneous group of people composed of various backgrounds, classes, and motivations. For example, the political and religious fragmentations that exist among the Kurdish communities in Turkey can also be found among the European Diaspora. There are upper, middle, and lower class Kurdish families in Turkey who might all have migrated for political reasons. There are Kurdish migrants who supported various political groups in Turkey. For instance, among the interviewees, many had migrated due to their membership in leftist parties and organizations or Kurdish movements, such as Rizgari or Kawa (predecessors of the PKK). It is similarly difficult to make any generalizations about the religious orientations of the Diaspora Kurds. Many were practicing Muslims that belonged to different sects of Islam, such as Sunni or Alevi, others were atheists. Some of the interviewees were fluent in Kurdish (Kurmanji or Zazaki), while some spoke only Turkish. Their approaches to political issues in Turkey, their identity formation, and their level of engagement with political activism in Europe all varied depending on the factors mentioned above. Therefore, it is hard to talk about a single “Kurdish identity” that is shared by all the Kurds of the Diaspora.

When they migrated, Kurds followed their familial and political networks, which led to the concentration of the Kurdish Diaspora in certain countries, mainly Germany, Sweden, France, and the Netherlands (Amiriaux 2005: 72). Whilst no recent or reliable census of the Kurdish population in Europe has been undertaken, the most widely accepted estimates are that about 850,000 Kurds are dispersed throughout Western Europe, with approximately 500,000-600,000 of those living in Germany. The Kurdish Institute of Paris provides figures showing the distribution of Kurdish migrants in several European countries, but this data dates back to 1995 and does not reflect the large number of Kurds who have immigrated to Europe since that time. According to other sources, the number of European Diaspora Kurds is closer to one million, with 85 percent coming from Turkey. The Council of Europe estimates the number of Kurds in Europe to be over one million (Russell-Johnson 2006). However, several Kurdish organizations in Sweden and Germany cite the number of Kurds in Europe as being far greater than the available statistics suggest (they argue there are at least two million).

For instance, according to KOMKAR, the number of Kurds in Germany alone is about 900,000.<sup>1</sup>

The unreliability of the statistics result from three main factors: (1) many Kurds hold Turkish citizenship and therefore do not appear in official European state statistics; (2) Thousands of Kurdish migrants in Europe remain undocumented; and (3) Current estimates of the Kurdish population published in studies or on Kurdish websites incorporate all Kurds, including those from Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. As Ayata (2011: 142) explains, researchers and scholars who produce knowledge about the Kurdish Diaspora tend to emphasize the fact that the numbers are not reliable, yet they continue to reproduce the existing estimates. Therefore, until further empirical research is conducted to produce an accurate census of the Kurdish population living in Europe, the numbers will lack full credibility.

### ***The Profile of the Kurdish Diaspora in Europe***

Europe provided a fertile ground for the cultivation of Kurdish nationalism outside the confines of Turkish borders. Groups of Kurdish workers immigrating to Europe in the 1970s were joined by other Kurds who arrived as asylum seekers. This combined influx reached such a point that these Kurdish immigrant communities were able to establish organizations and groups and begin to influence politics in Turkey as well as in the countries in which they had settled. For the labor migrant group, it has been argued by many that the mobilization efforts of the Kurdish elites in several European countries helped Kurds to gain a greater degree of consciousness with respect to their ethnic identity. A significant number of Kurds only discovered their “Kurdishness” as a *politicized ethnic-identity* in Europe, where they could express their culture, language, and organize themselves without fear of repression. Kurds who were unable to celebrate their Kurdish heritage in their previous country were now able to do so while living in liberal, Western states (van Bruinessen 2000; Demmers 2007: 17; Curtis 2005: 3). For instance, the number of people of Kurdish origin who identified themselves exclusively as Kurdish rose from 20 percent to 76 percent between the 1980s and the 1990s in

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<sup>1</sup> “Wer Wir Sind?” [http://www.komkar.org/wer\\_wir\\_sind.html](http://www.komkar.org/wer_wir_sind.html).

Germany (Blatte 2003: 10). Khayati (2008b) enumerates various reasons as to how this awakening process may have come into being:

the substantial growth in the numbers, geographical dispersal, [and] organization of Diaspora communities [with] greater social and political visibility and influence largely contributed to the awakening of what certain researchers call 'previously dormant Diasporas' among the Kurds.

The liberal environment in addition to the efforts of the Diaspora elites to raise awareness about the Kurdish movement paved the way for the emergence of a notable Diaspora community throughout Europe. For instance, Kurds who had arrived during the late 1970s or after the 1980 military coup were already politically mobilized before they reached Europe. Some were involved in leftist movements, while a number were already involved in the Kurdish movement. In addition, it is fair to say that the core of the Diaspora -the Diaspora elite- consists of those who came to Europe after the 1980s for political reasons. These were the Diaspora members who built the Kurdish movement in Europe and subsequently widened its base to include Kurdish migrants who had no prior attachments to Kurdish or other political movements.

The interviews I conducted, as well as several other studies and accounts, illustrate the fact that many Kurds and Turks who migrated to Europe due to the political turmoil in Turkey kept the idea of "returning to Turkey when the time is right" in mind. They invested a considerable amount of energy into producing newspapers and journals, organizing protests and meetings, and recruiting other leftists and Kurds in Turkey to their cause. Most of these asylum seekers had an "exile" frame of mind and, therefore, placed a higher priority on political matters in Turkey than on the social or political environment of the countries in which they were currently residing. The idea of return, the ceaseless urge to "do something for the cause," had dominated their lives for decades.

Looking at a few examples of first-generation Kurds in Sweden can help us to understand the state of mind of the politically active Kurdish elite in Europe. Şeyhmus Diken (2007: 13), a Kurdish intellectual and activist from Diyarbakir, observes the following regarding Kurds in Sweden:

I realize they have not changed their ideas, though 20 years have passed. They were isolated. It was like they stopped living in the 1980s and have not moved on. They were small groups, always on guard, and they were making political references to each particular aspect of life.<sup>2</sup> (Author's translation from Turkish)

In his book, he recounts the various interviews he conducted with Kurdish activists he calls "exiles from Amed," the majority of whom resided in Sweden. From the interviews, one gets the impression that the activists who fled to Sweden during the 1970s and 1980s certainly harbored a desire to return. This issue is raised numerous times by Diken's interviewees, who were in leading positions of the Kurdish movement in Sweden. According to the information they provided, most of the Kurdish asylum seekers belonged to leftist or Kurdish movements. These narratives also illustrate the importance that the Kurds in Sweden placed on the cultivation of Kurdish language and literature. One respondent told Diken that they were already politically active when they migrated to Sweden, living with one question in their minds: "What can I do in Sweden to promote the Kurdish struggle?" In this vein, one of the interviewees, J. İhsan Espar, asserts that he always lived with the thought that his peers back in Diyarbakir would someday ask him what he had done in Europe all those years. He stated he felt he had some responsibilities with regards to the Kurdish cause (Diken 2007: 130).

It is also important to remember that a considerable number of the Diaspora elite who set the direction of the Kurdish movement in Europe had been jailed in Turkey, especially around the beginning of 1980s, for political reasons before emigrating and, thus, had experienced torture and suppression first-hand. Among my interviewees, especially those in Berlin, there were members of Kurdish organizations who had been detained in Diyarbakir or other prisons for significant lengths of time. These kinds of traumatic experiences surely had an impact on their willingness to cling to the Kurdish cause and put the individual benefits of living in Europe aside even if they did not want to or could not return to Turkey for political reasons.

Asylum seekers who arrived in Europe from the 1990s onward also had similar experiences before migrating. However, leaving Turkey did not end the sufferings of

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<sup>2</sup> Author's translation from Turkish.

many Kurds. My fieldwork in Germany, for instance, revealed that coming to Europe - legally or illegally- was difficult and demanding for many Kurdish migrants; in particular, undocumented Kurds in Germany suffered great hardship for long periods of time before being granted any rights. Even those possessing legal documentation would experience adaptation problems in their host country, and racism and discrimination often made matters worse. Although some members of the Kurdish Diaspora followed local political developments as closely as those in Turkey, I also interviewed several Kurdish activists who had lived in Germany for decades, yet showed no interest in German politics. These Kurds clung only to the dream of “returning to Kurdistan.” Therefore, it is hard to come up with generalizations that explain a certain correlation between Diaspora Kurds’ levels of integration in their host country and their involvement in homeland politics.

The problems that the Kurds experienced, their opportunities for raising awareness about the Kurdish issue, their dreams about returning to their homeland, and their hopes about their descendants’ futures all depended on several factors. Not every Kurd was welcomed in the same manner into every European country. Their reasons for leaving Turkey, their political or social background, and their host country’s relations with Turkey all affected their propensity for political activism. Below, some examples are given from the experiences of Kurdish migrants in Sweden and Germany in order to illustrate differences in terms of living conditions, political and economic opportunities in the host countries, and political activities of the migrants. As can be seen, it is hard to talk about the Kurdish Diaspora in Europe as a monolithic body, since experiences tended to vary according to the country in which Diaspora members were residing.

### *The German Experience*

Kurds had to fight to reconstruct their identities in an alien society, although European states were liberal in the sense that one could express oneself freely there. Most European countries, including Germany, perceived the Kurds as a subgroup of Turkish immigrants and initially paid little attention to their cause. Since they arrived in Germany as “Turkish citizens,” they were treated as such by the host society. In addition

to struggling to overcome discrimination and xenophobia in Europe, they also had to fight for ethno-cultural recognition as “Kurds.” In most European countries, they were perceived as a “minority within a minority.” Ammann draws attention to the invisibility of the Kurdish population in Germany explaining how even Kurdish stores and restaurants were not recognizable because they were treated simply as “Turkish” or “Middle Eastern” (Ammann 2005: 1013). According to Mandel (2008: 158), the Kurds who escaped repression and persecution in Turkey encountered insensitivity and discrimination of a different kind.

Another example involves the issue of Kurdish names. As parents were only allowed to choose state-approved names for their children, Kurds possessing Turkish citizenship were required to give Turkish names to their children. German authorities only permitted names approved by the Turkish consulate (Mushaben 2008: 154). Furthermore, their Kurdish ethnicity was not recognized as a distinct identity by the German state, and their children were forced to attend Turkish migrant schools or were placed in Turkish classes. Only very recently has Kurdish begun to be taught in some German schools, but only upon special request by the parents. Many interviewees complained about this sort of treatment, claiming that “Turkish assimilation policies were imposed on the Kurdish Diaspora in Germany.” Therefore, Kurds in Germany felt doubly-excluded by two more dominant groups: Germans and Turks.

Kurdish activism related to the PKK will be dealt with in more detail in the following sections. However, one should be reminded that due to segregation and xenophobia, many Kurds did not feel like they were part of German society, which fueled extremism within Kurdish circles<sup>3</sup>. Many second generation Kurds joined the PKK (Ammann 2005: 1014). At the beginning of the 1990s, PKK activities were becoming highly visible in Germany. There were clashes between Turkish nationalist and Kurdish separatist

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<sup>3</sup> At this point, I believe that the argument that “migrants became politically-active about homeland issues or even become extremists because they were discriminated by the German society” may explain the recruitment rate for the Kurdish movement to some extent, however it is hardly sufficient to understand the mechanisms underlying Diaspora mobilization. Moreover, this explanation for the participation in the Kurdish cause upsets the Kurds in Germany because it “degrades” their cause. Most of my interviewees were disturbed by the fact that the Kurdish movement has been (and continues to be) depicted as a movement for the “hopeless youths who could not integrate.”

groups on the streets of Berlin and other German cities. Germany endured the bulk of this contentious struggle between Diaspora Turks and Kurds, as it contained the highest number of Kurds and Turks of any country in Europe. It was an obvious that the “little Turkey” emerging in Berlin’s ghettos, sooner or later would become a fertile breeding ground for Turkey’s troubled politics. Each time a development occurred in Turkey related to the Kurdish issue, Kurdish activists blocked highways, occasionally stormed Turkish consulates, and vandalized Turkish properties—proof enough for the German authorities that the conflict had been brought to Germany.

By 1995, the Kurds had been charged with around 200 arson attacks against Turkish properties, stores, and banks (Mushaben 2008: 154). Several violent protests, in which several thousand German police were present in order to maintain control, had also been staged. For example, on one such occasion, 40 policemen and 300 protestors were badly injured, 600 people were arrested, and another 1,900 were temporarily held in police custody (Chapin 1996). Several large protests were also organized in some 29 European cities simultaneously. As a result, German authorities closed down 33 associations that had organic links to the PKK (Abadan-Unat 2002: 269).

Violent protests and street fights with Turkish groups seriously damaged the image of Kurds in the eyes of both German politicians and ordinary citizens. PKK-related violence not only stigmatized Kurdish organizations with links to the PKK, but also affected organizations that had no affiliation with the PKK. By the end of the 1990s, Kurds had largely been stereotyped as either victims or terrorists (Ammann 2005: 1017). Today, although the majority of Kurdish organizations try to act in the framework of NGOs and civil society organizations, the impacts of the “criminalization” of the Kurdish movement can still be felt.

### *The Swedish Experience*

Compared with those living in Germany, the Kurdish migrants in Sweden had a much different experience. One explanation for this difference could be that the number of Kurds who emigrated from Turkey to Sweden was much smaller than the number who went to Germany. A second reason could be the profile of the immigrants. While

Germany had received a highly heterogeneous group of immigrants from various classes and social strata, Sweden welcomed a more homogenous, higher-profile stratum of Kurdish activists, something akin to a “Kurdish intelligentsia.” Since day one, Sweden granted various rights to the Kurdish population, including the right to an education in their mother language. It recognized “Kurdishness” as a separate ethnic identity, a policy that contrasted with other countries’ treatment of Kurdish migrants. Accordingly, it is the only country in Europe that registers Kurds as such in census reports (Ayata 2008). It is a unique country in Europe in terms of the cultural opportunities it grants to the Kurdish population. As van Bruinessen (2000: 10) recounts:

Sweden gives all immigrant communities great facilities for teaching, publishing, and broadcasting in their mother tongues. The Kurdish writers found here a much more stimulating environment for developing Kurdish into a modern literary language than they would have found back in Turkey, even if the language had not been banned there.

The Diaspora in Sweden has contributed immensely to Kurdish literature and has published prolifically, producing some forty to fifty books per year in addition to numerous journals. Moreover, it was in Stockholm that the Kurdish chapter of International PEN, a worldwide association of writers, was established (Ayata 2008). Owing to the opportunities provided by the Swedish state, the Kurdish Diaspora became one of the most politicized Diasporas in Sweden (Khayati 2008). Naturally, Sweden became a safe haven for Kurds who fled the oppression of their homeland, as they were granted the opportunity to preserve their culture, traditions, and education in their mother-tongue, which had all been endangered in Turkey. The interviews I conducted also illustrated this fact. The percentage of Diaspora members in Sweden who could speak fluent Kurdish, especially among those of the second generation, was much higher when compared with the German Diaspora. The majority of the Kurdish nationalists active in political organizations were not only fluent in Kurmanji, but also had a strong command of Sorani.

In Sweden, Kurds cultivated a positive image for a lengthy period of time; however,

some issues remain contentious between Swedish society and the Kurdish Diaspora. Almost all authors mention cases of honor killings and the assassination of Olof Palme as the definitive reasons for the emergence of negative perceptions of Kurds in Sweden. Regarding the Palme murder, police were suspicious of Kurdish groups connected to the murder, although little proof has surfaced to support a connection (Westin 2000: 5; Khayati 2008). The death of Fadime Şahindal, a girl killed by her father, also had sparked a debate about the issue of honor killings. In the Swedish context, since honor killings are primarily linked to Kurdish families, these events were more closely associated with the Kurdish population than with the Muslim community as a whole. Combined with the stigmatized image of immigrants with an Islamic background, these facts have seriously damaged the reputation of the Kurdish Diaspora community. In addition, Khayati (2008: 224-226) underlines the fact that Swedish society tends to relate crime to ethnic background; thus, it is quite difficult for the Kurds to rectify their image in Sweden. However, the promulgation of these stereotypes does not seem to have negatively influenced how Swedes approach the Kurdish question at the political level.

### ***Early Kurdish Political Activism in Europe and PKK Domination of the “Kurdish Movement”***

#### *Early Kurdish Political Activism and the Formation of KOMKAR*

Most of the Kurdish political activity in Europe has been enabled and reinforced by migrant organizations. Ethnic organizations were established on the heels of incoming waves of Kurdish migrants. The earliest organizations were formed by students and workers, and these organizations later added cultural issues to their agenda. Only after the 1980s did the organizations being established take on a considerably political tone. For instance, at the beginning of the 1970s in Germany, some organizations, inspired by the political climate in Turkey, changed their name from “Turkish Migrants” to “Migrants from Turkey,” in order to be more inclusive towards other ethnic groups from Turkey, including the Kurds. Many Kurds were already involved in leftist movements, and, after the mid-1970s, they began forming their own leftist organizations in Germany. Starting with the Iraqi Kurd organization called Kurdish Students Society in Europe (KSSE), the

number of Kurdish organizations operating in Europe began to rise significantly. In 2005, for instance, Ammann counted 150 active Kurdish organizations alone in Germany (Ammann 2005: 1013). Below, I focus on the German case which gives an idea of how the Kurdish Diaspora mobilization also occurred in other European countries.

My interview with Rıza Baran, one of the founders of the first Kurdish associations in Germany and a former MP from Berlin, offers an important overview of the course of events occurring within the Turkish community in Germany. His testimony shows that Turks and Kurds initially began to assemble together within organizations that were intended to bring “immigrants from Turkey” together, and which did not prioritize one ethnic identity over the other. However, with time, disagreements emerged between the Turkish and Kurdish members of the main associations over Kurdish demands in Germany, such as education in Kurdish or the recognition of “Kurdishness” as a separate ethnic identity. Therefore, many Kurds broke away from these Turkish-led organizations and started their own associations, which aimed to bring Kurds together in order to speak with one united voice in demanding these rights in Germany. He also explained that there were two main reasons why Kurds had left these Turkish organizations, especially after the beginning of 1990s: (1) the clash between the Turkish army and the PKK affected the relationship between Turks and Kurds in Germany; and (2) due to the ongoing Kurdish struggle in other parts of Kurdistan, many Kurds from Iraq and Syria were also migrating to Germany; thus, more and more Kurds were getting the chance to meet and know other, which, in the end, caused the Kurds from Turkey to begin to think more broadly about their identity and place their movement in a wider context.<sup>4</sup>

According to Rıza Baran’s accounts, the Kurdish activists who were aiming to form a separate Kurdish association, in the 1970s, found it difficult to establish an organization with the word “Kurdistan” in its title, as they were afraid this might lead to them being deported back to Turkey. This fear explains why, despite almost all of the members being Kurdish, the first Kurdish organization took the name “Culture and Welfare Society of Workers in Turkey” (*Kultur-und Hilfsverein der Arbeiter der Türkei*). By 1979,

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<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed account of early Kurdish associations see Rıza Baran’s article: <https://newroz.com/tr/politics/347604/avrupada-k-rt-rg-tlenmes-ve-komkarriza-baran>

the number of Kurdish associations had already numbered 30. In order to combine their efforts, these organizations decided to form a federation and, in 1979, they founded KOMKAR.<sup>5</sup> It became the first organization to use the name “Kurdistan” in its title in Germany. Rıza Baran also mentions that a small number of KOMKAR members were deported by the German authorities due to their activism, but that the Kurds give up on the idea of having an organizational structure separate from the Turks. Baran states that, after all of this, Kurds decided to partner with Kemal Burkay’s Kurdistan Socialist Party. While discussing their aims, Baran notes:

We were aware that, before everything, we had to show the Germans that Kurds exist as a separate ethnic group. But it was hard...They only heard about Kurdistan from Karl May’s book.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, we had a long way to go.

KOMKAR focused most of its efforts on improving the standards of living for Kurdish workers in Europe, rather than on the struggle for an “independent Kurdistan.” Only after the 1980s did it become politically engaged and incorporate the promotion of Kurdish rights into its agenda (van Bruinessen 2000).

In many sources of news and information, including the German press, KOMKAR is usually depicted as an organization of “good Kurds,” and they often appear to be relatively moderate Kurdish nationalists who take a stance against using violence to promote their cause (Ercan-Argun 2003: 119). Also, clashes between KOMKAR and PKK drew significant attention from the press. In the mid- to late 1980s, there was frequently

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<sup>5</sup> It is a transnational Kurdish organization which became the first federation of Kurdish worker’s associations and is against the use of violence to promote the Kurdish cause. KOMKAR was affiliated with the Ozgurluk Yolu movement in Turkey and distanced itself from the PKK line by focusing on improving the Kurdish workers’ standards of living in Europe, rather than the struggle for an independent Kurdistan. Only after the 1980s did it become politically active and add Kurdish rights to its agenda (van Bruinessen 2000). However, it is argued by authors such as Jorgensen that the organizations which sympathize with the traditional PKK line managed to reach a broader segment of society (such as women, artists, students, and the self-employed) whereas KOMKAR recruited less successfully. He also claims that KOMKAR was better at making itself visible at the official level but was not as strong as the above-mentioned organizations, which drew thousands of people to their demonstrations and protests (Jorgensen 2008). The sphere of KOMKAR is much larger and extends to 40,000 and 50,000 people. On their webpage, they declare that “KOMKAR wants to achieve Kurdish rights with the peaceful and political solutions in Turkey and in the other three parts of Kurdistan. Thus, the public relations and lobbying is an important focus of the work of KOMKAR.”

<sup>6</sup> Karl May, *Durchs Wilde Kurdistan [Through Wild Kurdistan]*, 1892.

tension between KOMKAR and PKK that occasionally erupted into violence. The two organizations were operating side-by-side in Germany and elsewhere, all the while competing with each other for the loyalties of the Kurdish Diaspora.

The rivalry between these two groups only augmented the tensions between German authorities and Kurdish activists. For instance, according to Lyon & Uçarer (2001), the violence outbursts that had alarmed the German authorities, claimed the lives of several KOMKAR-supporters, and left others injured were often a product of the rivalry between the PKK and KOMKAR. As a direct result of these killings, the German authorities considered banning the organization (Lyon & Uçarer 2001: 936). Another episode of tension, for instance, was the Newroz celebrations of 2003, when a Sivan Perwer concert organized by KOMKAR was sabotaged by PKK supporters who violently brought it to a halt.

While there remains social and political friction between the two groups, no significant violent clashes have occurred in recent years. My interviews did reveal, however, that a certain level of tension still exists between the two groups. For instance, a group of interviewees who support the PKK reacted negatively to me when they discovered I was also interviewing people from KOMKAR. A few interviewees even cancelled their interviews immediately after hearing I had been attending seminars and doing participant observation at the KOMKAR headquarters in Berlin. Furthermore, a number of interviewees from KOMKAR held the belief that “the PKK was actually a well-planned project by the deep state (government) in Turkey.” While the two groups might continue to have a strained relationship, compared to the 1990s, they have experienced a significant *détente* in their relations with one another. For instance, in 2011, for the first time organizational affiliates of the PKK celebrated Newroz with KOMKAR in Berlin.

Ostergaard-Nielsen points out that some Kurdish associations have resorted to offensive and even violent activities, especially in Germany, while others have insisted on peaceful methods of lobbying and dialogue. She argues that their actions have attracted significant media attention and subsequently barred the Kurds from directly interfacing with policymakers in Europe (Ostergaard-Nielsen 2006: 6). All of the KOMKAR

organizations throughout Europe (as well as its youth wing, known as KOMCIWAN) also suffer from the criminalization of the Kurdish movement in several European countries, especially since the EU placed the PKK on its list of designated terrorist organizations. The majority of the members of KOMKAR I interviewed complained about this fact and argued that PKK-related activities in Germany might have raised awareness about the situation of the Kurds in Turkey; however, it has also impeded the development of the Kurdish movement in Europe within a broader framework.

Aside from KOMKAR, other Kurdish groups have been formed in Europe that prioritized cultural, linguistic, and educational projects. The Kurdish Institute in Paris was formed in 1983 by Kurdish intellectuals with the support of the Socialist government in France.<sup>7</sup> It aimed at cultivating the Kurdish language, organizing conferences, and publishing journals. Far from being radical, the Institute was fairly moderate.<sup>8</sup> Subsequent Kurdish institutes established in Brussels, Berlin, Moscow, and Washington followed this model. In 1997, a Kurdish library was opened in Stockholm. It would thus appear that while Kurdish activists were seeking unity and harmony on various fronts, Europe was becoming the playground for the self-exploration of the Kurdish movement (Gunter 1991: 13; van Bruinessen 1999; Khayati 2008).<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the Kurdish Diaspora, especially over the last two decades, has become the financial, intellectual, political, and social driving force of Kurdish nationalism (Ercan-Argun 2003: 125).

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<sup>7</sup> The Institute has received support grants from the French, Norwegian, and Swedish governments, as well as from the European Union. Its activities include the training of Kurdish language teachers in Sweden, the training of Kurdish cultural élites, some of whom have played an important role in Iraq, hosting conferences on "honor killings," and the raising of international public awareness on Kurdish issues. See Russell-Johnson 2006.

<sup>8</sup> As stated on the organization's website: "Its objectives are to maintain in the Kurdish community a knowledge of its language, its history and its cultural heritage, to contribute to the integration of Kurdish immigrants to Europe into their host societies and to make the Kurds, their culture, their country and their present situation known to the general public." Available at: <http://www.institutkurde.org/en/institute/>.

<sup>9</sup> Khalid Khayati, "Link between Kurdish nationalism and Diaspora," *Kurdish Globe*, January 9, 2008. Available at:

<http://www.kurdishglobe.net/displayPrintableArticle.jsp?id=D5F273B00D14BA4E81322EA8E235C513>

### *PKK Domination and a Step Forward*

While studying the Kurdish movement across national borders, it is essential to understand the centrality of the PKK to Kurdish Diaspora politics in Europe (Soğuk 2008: 183). Although other Kurdish groups, such as Rizgari or Kawa, whose members has asylum status in Europe, or KOMKAR, were already in existence prior to the establishment of the PKK, it has been the strongest and most dominant Kurdish movement in Europe, and this was especially true during the 1990s. These previous groups, which carried out numerous activities regarding Kurdish identity, language, and culture prior to the arrival of the PKK in Europe, were eventually surpassed by pro-PKK Kurdish organizations. As Soğuk (2008: 10) puts it:

The PKK became the driving force behind the proliferation of the diasporic organizations, eclipsing several other influential movements active in the Kurdish Diaspora.

The expansion of Kurdish nationalist sentiments along with experiences of exclusion within host countries spurred the formation of extremist groups and nourished similar movements already established in Turkey. Many asylum seekers thereby constituted the cadre of PKK organizations present throughout Europe (Kirişçi, 2004: 289). As Betigül Ercan-Argun explains, PKK activities in Europe started around 1978. In the beginning of the 1980s, these activities had been controlled by the “European Bureau” of the PKK. The primary objectives of this organization were to recruit first and second generation migrant Kurds and dispatch them to Lebanon or to other training camps, as well as to raise awareness by conducting public and media relations and producing literature related to the PKK cause. The organization was very active all throughout Europe (Ercan-Argun 2003: 123).

Among these European countries, Germany became the center for the strategic and financial operations of the Kurdish movement (Curtis 2005: 8). Large sums of money were raised in Europe to support the Kurdish struggle. Second generation Kurdish youths were recruited in several European countries (especially Germany) to take a part in the movement - some as guerrilla fighters and others as activists or technicians of various sorts. There are arguments in the literature that some of the PKK’s financing

abroad was collected involuntarily through blackmailing schemes. It was also argued that a portion of its income was sustained through “involvement in drug trafficking and massive tax collection efforts that are linked to transnational criminal enterprises” (Eccarius-Kelly 2010: 102-3).

The PKK and several organizations that sympathize with it also published journals and magazines to raise awareness amongst the Kurdish population in Europe and beyond. The PKK and its sympathizer organizations were supported by two news agencies (including Fırat News Agency, based in the Netherlands), four television stations (Roj TV and MMC TV in Denmark, and Newroz TV in Norway and Sweden), 13 radio stations (including Denge Mezopotamya radio in Belgium), 10 newspapers (including Yeni Özgür Politika in Germany), three publishing houses (including Roj Group in Belgium), and numerous websites (including Kurdistan Youth Freedom Movement in Denmark, Kurdistan Italia in Italy, and Kongra-Gel in Germany).<sup>10</sup> Links to these organizations’ homepages may be found on the websites of numerous Kurdish organizations (Renard 2008). Medya TV and Roj TV in particular have produced cultural, educational, and political programs that have reached Kurds throughout Europe and helped to promote a greater “consciousness” of the developments occurring in the Kurdish-populated regions of Turkey (Ostergaard-Nielsen 2006: 7). Other media agencies have promoted Kurdish rights while remaining critical of the PKK. Among these, some are websites led by former PKK-supporters or militants who express criticism towards how the PKK operates. Others were closer to the Iraqi Kurdish movement and were not sympathetic to the PKK. Examples include websites such as Nasname (<http://www.nasname.com>) or Rizgari (<http://tr.rizgari.com>), whose main authors mostly reside in Germany. However, they were neither as widespread nor as strong as the pro-PKK media outlets in Europe.

Aside from the Kurdish media organizations that burgeoned in Europe, there were serious political attempts by the Kurds in Europe to make their claims more audible in the European arena. For many, the founding of a Kurdish Parliament in Exile in 1995 was proof that the center of Kurdish political activity had shifted to Europe (van

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<sup>10</sup> Some of these media institutions have been banned, temporarily or permanently, and have merely reappeared under another name and continued with the same type of broadcasts.

Bruinessen 1998: 46; Blatte 2003: 9; Radu 2001: 55). Whilst the Parliament in Exile was formed by the PKK and received no support from the other large Kurdish organizations that had distanced themselves from the PKK, it was, nonetheless, perceived by the European authorities as a semi-legitimate representation of Kurds from Turkey.<sup>11</sup> By the time it was disbanded in 1999, the Parliament had established several offices in Europe and made connections with a number of European political parties (Kirişçi 2004: 289). The exile government was very active in Europe, having organized meetings in Italy, Belgium, Sweden, France, and Spain. After its dissolution, the Kurdistan National Congress (KCN) was formed and began to take the lead in arranging meetings throughout Europe. These meetings promoted dialogue among already active members, facilitated the formation of a grand organizational strategy, and helped to encourage and mobilize other Kurds who had not previously been involved in such political activism.

Although the PKK dominated the debate for a significant period of time, other Diaspora groups from different political or religious backgrounds have managed to survive over the last three decades. Considering this fragmentation, Eccarius-Kelly (2008) argues that the politicized Kurdish wing in Europe has failed to establish Kurdish ideological unity on a broader scale. Kurds in Europe have failed to articulate a common political agenda and, moreover, Kurdish civil society actors have been unable to develop a more unified or representative voice (Eccarius-Kelly 2008). Among these fragmented entities, many have criticized the way the PKK has operated, especially in terms of its lack of transparency. As Soğuk points out, some Kurds were disturbed by how the PKK ruled the Diaspora but were fearful of possible PKK sanctions; others formed separate organizations and followed their own path (Soğuk 2008: 189). Therefore, it may be argued that the “most dominant voice” was accepted as the “most representative voice” for two decades in the European political arena. Although the PKK’s domination of the Kurdish debate often provoked criticism from various Kurdish Diaspora groups, mass protests and marches in the name of the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan created more legitimacy for the group in the eyes of the European authorities. Also, it is evident that the PKK and PKK-related organizations garnered a greater deal of mass support

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Barkey & Fuller, Chapter 2.

compared with other Kurdish groups in Europe. However, it can surely be claimed that the Kurdish movement cultivated in Europe is not a homogenous entity. Accordingly, there may be a divergence of approaches regarding a possible resolution for the Kurdish question in Turkey. There has always been a common grievance that has united them, however, and that is the unacceptability of the situation in Turkey in terms of the linguistic, cultural, political and social rights of Kurds.

Over the last decade (2000-2010), many Kurdish associations have altered their strategies as other, non-violent methods have gained popularity among the Diaspora. As a result of various factors, such as the post-September 11 security measures that have been implemented and changes in the paradigm of struggle amongst the Kurdish Diaspora members, there has been an accompanying shift away from militant activities in Europe, such as violent protests and open PKK propaganda, towards a more modest transnational movement that seeks to raise awareness about the Kurdish issue in a human rights context. Eccarius-Kelly (2010: 107-8) states:

As militants transitioned to Kurdish political activists and framed their struggle as a pursuit for minority rights and human rights, they gained important support from numerous leftist political organizations, activist groups, and political parties in Europe.

As she has observed, the Kurdish nationalists changed their strategy in Europe throughout the 2000s, especially after the capture of Öcalan, from a guerilla/insurgency strategy into a political one. A strategy of political mobilization structured within the framework of human and minority rights helped the Kurdish cause to become much more legitimate and worthy of support in the eyes of European politicians.

### 3. Taking a Closer Look at the Kurdish Diaspora

#### *Kurdish Diaspora(s): Divided We Stand?*

Most of the literature that deals with Kurds living abroad usually tends to ignore the different colors of the Kurdish Diaspora, in terms of religion, ideology, or attitudes towards the Kurdish struggle itself. In truth, myriad groups within the Kurdish Diaspora defend differing ideas, opt for divergent solutions to the Kurdish issue in Turkey, and advocate disparate strategies in Europe. However, one should always remember the common ground upon which these fragmented groups and individuals can come together and speak with one voice when necessary.

The different voices of the diverse Kurdish groups in the Diaspora have become unveiled in recent studies. For instance, Demir's work in London revealed that the Kurdish struggle in Turkey encompasses a broad spectrum of ideas. As she puts it:

Whilst for some [Kurds] this battle is fought for increased democratization and Kurdish linguistic and cultural rights in Turkey, for others it is fought for Kurdish autonomy (federalism); still others aspire to the establishment of a separate home for all Kurds comprising Iraqi, Syrian, Turkish and Iranian Kurds. For some it is non-ethnicity based, and is instead fought along revolutionary Marxist lines. (Demir 2011: 9)

While conducting my fieldwork in Sweden and Germany, I learned that members of the Diaspora remain united on one main problem: the Turkish state's oppression of the Kurdish population in Turkey. Yet, respondents conceptualized this issue in many different ways, and the ideas they offered on how the resolution process should proceed varied greatly. A multitude of opinions existed not only amongst different organizations, but also, surprisingly, amongst members belonging to the same organization. For instance, a number of interviewees defined themselves first and foremost as socialists, and secondly as Kurdish patriots (but not nationalists). For many, there was a difference in their conceptualization of Kurdish and Turkish nationalism; however, they still opted to define themselves as patriots rather than as nationalists. Among the interviewees, there were socialists, communists, and other leftists who defined themselves as neither of these two. Many stated that they were a part of the Kurdish movement because of the

values they believed in, not because of their ethnic Kurdish identity. Yet, they managed to work hand in hand with organizations that also had members who defined themselves as Kurdish nationalists and had no sympathy for communism, socialism, or leftist ideals per se. In these organizations, the people who defined themselves as leftists were typically first generation members who had emigrated just prior to or during the 1980s. The second generation Kurds I interviewed rarely identified themselves as leftist.

Based on my fieldwork, which included observations and interviews, it is evident that the differing ideas held by various members of the Diaspora cannot be explained solely by referencing the agendas of the different and sometimes rival Kurdish organizations. Therefore, I argue here that the major political dividing lines within the Diaspora may be categorized under the following headings:

- PKK supporters who voice unwavering support for Öcalan (known as “Apocular”);
- PKK supporters who sympathize with the PKK but take issue with Öcalan’s statements since his imprisonment;
- Former PKK supporters or former PKK cadres who are now suspicious of the PKK in general and have even argued that the PKK may have connections to the deep state (government) in Turkey;
- Kurdish nationalists who oppose the PKK and its methods and follow the nonviolent KOMKAR line;
- Kurdish nationalists who criticize the PKK’s methods but do not belong to any other organizations and make individual contributions to the cause;
- Kurdish nationalists who do not belong to any organization but support the idea of a separate state and therefore find the PKK to be overly passive and ill-equipped to achieve this goal;
- Kurdish nationalists who not only want a Kurdish state separate from Turkey but also support a unified Kurdistan which would bring together the four Kurdish-populated regions in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey.

Of course, one could add numerous additional categories with various nuances to the above list. What is very clear is that the first two categories were the most dominant. However, it should be remembered that the combined efforts of these different Kurdish groups intersect at some critical junctures. Although it seems that serious political cleavages exist between these different Kurdish groups, in most cases when a significant event occurs in Turkey, these above-mentioned groups may collaborate on a joint action. There is almost always a common front with enough room to accommodate a majority of Kurdish organizations.

Numerous interviewees complained when I asked them if there was any rivalry or disagreement between the different Kurdish groups. They argued that they were tired of being asked these questions, and they stressed their concerns about the possibility that discussing these fragmentations or different approaches could be used by certain people and groups to marginalize or misrepresent the Kurdish movement. As one of my interviewees put it:

We cannot agree on everything. Which nation in the world has members who think the same? Yes, there are differences in our approaches to the question of "how to solve the Kurdish Question." ...But, you may divide us, multiply us, and add us as much as you want... Do all the the four arithmetical operations you can...It does not matter. Every Kurd is sad when a guerilla dies...

### ***Relations with other Kurds from Iran, Iraq, and Syria***

The Kurdish Diaspora originating from Turkey found more freedom to explore its heritage and identity in the liberal democratic states of Europe than it had in its homeland. It also met with the opportunity to intermingle with other Kurds from Syria, Iraq, and Iran, which may contribute significantly to the creation of an integrated "Kurdish identity and culture," bringing together the entire Kurdish population of the Middle East. Therefore, the Diaspora has also become a space for the Kurds to construct the idea of "Kurdistan" as an imagined community. The environment of the European host countries offers the Kurds the possibility to first, get to know each other after years

of separation by national borders, and second, to overcome regional diversity. In the Diaspora, Kurds attempt to homogenize and, if possible, unify the community.

The Kurdish Diaspora in Europe finds not only the opportunity to engage in “identity-making” processes without repression, but also enough room to actualize its boundary-making and sustain its boundary-maintenance vis-à-vis other ethnic groups such as Arabs and Turks. According to my fieldwork observations, I argue that, especially in Scandinavia, Kurds from Turkey identify much more strongly with Kurdish groups from Iran, Iraq, and Syria than with Turkish groups. In Sweden, the majority of the second generation Kurds had no attachments to any Turkish organizations, but formed their associations in a pan-Kurdish manner. For example, the largest Kurdish student association in Sweden, KSAF, is a party politics-free organization that gathers Kurdish youth from the four different Kurdish-populated countries and allows them to embrace “Kurdish identity and culture” and “Kurdistan” as a whole. Rather than forming four separate Diaspora groups (i.e., Iranian, Iraqi, Syrian, and Turkish Kurd groups), the Kurdish youth from these different countries have tended to join all-Kurdish associations, which has contributed to the ideological construction of a “pan-Kurdish unity.”

On the other hand, in Germany, the picture is somewhat different. I do not suggest that there is no unity at all among the Kurds from Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey in Germany, however, at an organizational level, it is clear that less cooperation exists when compared with the Kurds in Sweden. It is apparent that in Germany, most of the Kurds organize themselves along separate ideological, religious or regional lines.<sup>12</sup> Although organizations such as KOMKAR managed to attract Kurdish members from throughout the Kurdish-populated areas of the Middle East, in general, there is an absence of full cooperation among the Kurds from different countries in Germany. Kurds from Iran have their own organizations, Kurds from Turkey have their own organizations which are divided by ideological lines and there are also organizations that are solely focusing on a particular region such as Dersim.

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<sup>12</sup> More information regarding these Kurdish organizations can be found through the Kurdology Center in Berlin. See <http://www.kurdologie.de/cmsmadesimple/index.php>.

A Kurd from Syria who was a member of a Kurdish organization complained that the Kurdish organizations formed by Kurds from Turkey use mostly Turkish in their activities, which caused him to refuse to send his children to these organizations. A Kurdish member of another association also argued that every organization is highly politicized and that he, “has nothing to do with the other Kurdish movements in Iraq or Iran so there is no reason to participate in their meetings.”

The interviews also revealed existence of stereotypes especially among the first-generation interviewees. A respondent who has close ties to the PKK and joined numerous protests organized in Germany in the 1990s stated, “We have nothing in common with those Arabs (in reference to Kurds from Iraq and Syria).” He also added that he believes if they start working together, Kurds from Iraq will try to dominate their activities; therefore, it is better for the Kurds from Turkey to stay away and maintain their own independent movement. İpek Demir also noted such “Orientalized” views among Kurds from Turkey toward other Kurdish groups while she was conducting research on the Kurdish Diaspora in London. According to her accounts:

When I asked about interactions between Kurds from other countries, I was told by a Kurdish café owner from Turkey: ‘Their culture is very different from ours. They are awkward.’ Another Kurd from Turkey, who is a prominent member of a leftist organization, stated: ‘Their culture is very different. They are feudal.’ (Demir 2011)

Another field study, conducted by Pattison and Tavşanoğlu (2002: 12) in London, revealed similar findings. One of their interviewees expressed her problematic sense of identity:

When people ask me who I am, I first say I am Kurdish because I share a lot of things with them, but there is no place called Kurdistan. When I meet Kurds from other regions I cannot find anything in common with them. I feel close to Turks, I feel close to people from Turkey. It’s not my fault the Turkish system assimilated us. Sometimes I’m very annoyed. They did all sorts of unforgivable things to us.

The country in which the Kurdish Diaspora resides has an impact on the formation of these above-mentioned identities. Therefore, it should be emphasized that Scandinavia

is the place where Kurdish identity has been the least suppressed, and it remains the region in Europe where Kurdish activism has been the least affected by “post-September 11 security syndrome.” It is also where the Kurdish elite most heavily supported the cultivation of the Kurdish language and literature. Kurdish identity has, therefore, flourished much more rapidly in Scandinavia compared to the rest of Europe. Other countries, such as the UK and Germany, may lag behind in terms of the support they have offered thus far to the Kurds. In addition, the Swedish system encourages the formation of pan-ethnic migrant organizations, since funding from the state gets easier to obtain as a migrant organization grows its membership. Therefore, the Diaspora elite tries to ameliorate the “party politics mentality” and unite as many members as possible under the same roof in order to secure more funding from the state and to be seen as the sole representative of the entire migrant community. In contrast, most of the associations in Germany are self-reliant and do not receive funding from the state. This affects how well the Diaspora organizations are able to gather their constituencies all under one roof. The associations often serve as a mirror image of the political or religious fragments within the migrant community, and they reflect these tensions, prejudices, and rivalries among Kurdish groups themselves or with Turks and Arabs in German political and social spheres.

### ***Relations with Turks in Europe***

While at first glance, the interactions between the Turkish and Kurdish communities abroad may seem to mirror the situation in Turkey, on closer inspection, it becomes clear that the cleavages are deeper, mutual perceptions are more rigid, prejudices between the two groups more prolific, and there are even “invisible battle zones” between different communities who are in conflict for ideological, ethnic, or religious reasons.

While conducting my fieldwork, I interviewed Turks in both Sweden and Germany who boycotted Kurdish shops because they did not want to contribute to the “PKK budget.” Similarly, I interviewed Kurds who refused to eat in Turkish restaurants because they believed all Turks to be “fascists.” There might be group members who perceive being

an “immigrant in a European country” or a “Muslim” as a fairly unproblematic umbrella identity and who show little concern with “Turkishness” and “Kurdishness,” however, for members of the two groups who emphasize their ethnic identity, there is a notable divide.

This divide has been observed by many researchers, as well as by state officials. For instance, the Third Ambassadorial Congress, which gathered Turkish ambassadors together from 180 different countries all over the world, also became a platform to discuss this disconnect.<sup>13</sup> According to the ambassadors:

1. The Turkish-Kurdish divide is getting deeper every day in Europe;
2. Since the ban on the PKK in Europe, the Kurdish associations and activists have retired into themselves and cut off all relations with Turkish groups; and
3. There is a tremendous division among the groups from Turkey. For example, they do not even go to the same mosques anymore; each group has its own space and activity arena where there is no place for others.

These observations are fairly accurate. As my fieldwork in Germany and Sweden revealed, Kurds and Turks have drifted apart and have often had very little social interaction. They attend their own mosques and visit their own shops. They have also created comfort zones and taboos related to each other’s ideological stance. For example, the Kurds in Kreuzberg boycotted the Hasır Restaurant because they saw the owner offering free baklava in celebration when Öcalan was captured in 1999. These kinds of acts - which draw sharp ethnic or ideological boundaries towards another group – make an immediate impact. It is the same on the Turkish side. If they believe that the owner of a shop or restaurant donates money to the PKK, they will not go there, and they warn others not to go either and “contribute”.

Especially in the Scandinavian countries, where the number of Turkish and Kurdish migrants and their descendants is small compared to Germany or France, the two

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<sup>13</sup> “Avrupadaki Türkler ve Kurtler Birbirine Yabancilasti,” *Sabah*, January 1, 2011. Available at: [http://www.sabah.com.tr/Gundem/2011/01/05/avrupadaki\\_kurtler\\_ve\\_turkler\\_birbirine\\_yabancilasti#](http://www.sabah.com.tr/Gundem/2011/01/05/avrupadaki_kurtler_ve_turkler_birbirine_yabancilasti#).

groups can afford to ignore each other completely in the political, social, and economic spheres of daily life. The number of intermarriages also seems to be quite small compared to Turkey. In Sweden, for example, among my interviewees from the Turkish or Kurdish community, the idea of Turks and Kurds intermarrying was seen as mostly undesirable. Furthermore, among my interviewees from the Turkish and Kurdish communities in Sweden, there was no interaction at the organizational level concerning efforts at conflict resolution in Turkey, let alone on any other subjects. Many Kurdish interviewees talked about the difficulties they might face when considering a project that would entail cooperation with Turkish groups in Sweden. Their concern was that their organization members would not agree to such an idea.

A similar study conducted in London confirmed these observations. According to Miall, Orrnert, and Şimşek, there is almost no dialogue occurring between the Turkish and Kurdish communities in London; instead, there is polarization. There are two main perceptions that shape relations between the two groups: (1) From the Kurdish side, there is no conflict between the two communities, as the Kurdish struggle is with the Turkish state, not with the Turkish population; and (2) From the Turkish side, the Turkish people have no conflict with the Kurdish people, but only with the terrorists, the PKK (Miall, Orrnert & Şimşek, 20).

These two arguments also appeared in my study in Sweden and Germany;

- Many Kurds claimed they did not have a problem with the Turks themselves but with the Turkish state, yet during the interviews, they expressed sentiments such as, “fascist Turks who support the state policies,” or “Kemalist Turks who are against Kurdish rights” countless times. The further I questioned them on these statements, the more the definition of “Turk” was revealed as “the other,” especially among the second generation interviewees. The Kurds who participate in Kurdish nationalist movements ultimately choose to distance themselves from Turks which, over time, results not only in deterioration, but possibly the complete erosion of civil relations.

- Many Turks stated that they have no problems with Kurds, only with the “terrorists.” During the interviews, however, the definition of a “terrorist” was so vague that it could include anyone who supports Kurdish rights in a human rights context. Further questioning revealed that some Turkish community members made a distinction in their minds between “good Kurds” and “bad Kurds.” Those Kurds who accept a Turkish identity and suppress their Kurdish identity are perceived as “good Kurds” with whom one can have “normal” relations. “Bad Kurds” are the ones who refuse to accept “Turkishness,” at least as an umbrella identity, or who participate in Kurdish nationalist movements. These were labeled by Turkish community members as “terrorists” or “sympathizers” of terrorism.

Both communities followed developments in Turkey closely. As one of my interviewees in Sweden put it: “There is no escape from Turkey. It does not matter where you go in this world. Turkey’s troubles will come and find you.” Critical events such as the capture of Öcalan, the PKK offensives which kill numerous soldiers (or vice versa), and the ban on Kurdish political parties and politicians have had a significant impact on relations between Kurdish and Turkish groups in Europe. These events occasionally provoke violent encounters between the two groups, as mentioned earlier. In Germany and Belgium in particular, violent clashes between Turks and Kurds are reported in the media after crucial events occur in Turkey regarding the Kurdish issue. The abyss between second generation Turks and Kurds is likely to widen, and their relationship may end up resembling the one between Armenians and Turks, who once lived in the same geographical region but are now driven by their prejudices against one other. Second generation Kurds have no experience of living alongside the Turks and, therefore, can only conceptualize “the other”—mostly from the historic or shared memories of others and the media. Therefore, it is entirely possible that these cleavages will deepen with each successive generation.

#### 4. Europeanization of the Kurdish Issue

##### *How did the “Kurdish Issue” Become a Debate in Europe?*

The Kurdish Diaspora has a difficult task to accomplish in Europe. Kurdish groups have to work in highly innovative ways and expend a great deal of energy to achieve their goals compared to other state-linked Diasporas, such as the Turkish communities. Without any state support, they are alone in the political sphere and entirely reliant on their own lobbying capabilities, since their only chance of exerting influence at the local and EU-level is by leveraging political parties of the host states along with national or international NGOs. The main activities they conduct throughout Europe can be summarized as follows:

- Protecting the “Kurdish identity” against assimilation both in Europe and in Turkey, working on achieving full ethno-cultural recognition of their identity in Turkey and beyond as “Kurds” and not as “Turks” or “Arabs”;
- Affecting policy-making procedures both in Europe and in Turkey in favor of the Kurdish population, raising awareness about the Kurdish cause; and
- Promoting identity-formation by working on issues related to the cultivation of culture and language, the standardization of the Kurdish language etc.

Today, there are thousands of small Kurdish organizations as well as several Kurdish umbrella institutions in Europe which aim to form a united Diaspora in order to conduct lobbying activities at the European national and supranational level. For example, the Association of Kurdish Organizations in Europe (KON-KURD) was founded in Belgium for such purposes. It serves as an umbrella organization for various Kurdish groups, more than 150 worldwide.<sup>14</sup> Based in Brussels, it is responsible for Kurdish lobbying activities at the European institutional level. Among the most significant associations is YEK-KOM<sup>15</sup> (Council of Kurdish Associations in Germany) which is based in Germany

<sup>14</sup> See <http://konkurd.org/fr/link-1232550498.html>.

<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.yek-kom.com/>.

and encompasses about 50 Kurdish organizations. Other examples include the Kurdish Federation in UK (FED-BIR)<sup>16</sup>, The Kurdish Federation of Associations in France (FEYKA-KURDISTAN), The Kurdish Federation of Associations in Netherlands (FED-KOM)<sup>17</sup>, The Kurdish Federation of Associations in Austria (FEY-KOM), and The Kurdish Federation of Associations in Denmark (FEY-KURD)<sup>18</sup>, which are all large Kurdish organizations known to be sympathetic to the PKK. Lastly, there is KOMKAR, which is known for its stance against the use of violence to promote the Kurdish cause.

It is true that Kurdish migration, through the associations' activities and propaganda, brought about the transnationalization of the Kurdish issue. The Kurdish Diaspora learned how to utilize the claims-making systems in Europe as well as how to make their claims at different levels, from local and national to supranational (Ostergaard-Nielsen 2006: 5). At the local level, they tried to influence local political leaders and civil society institutions. At the national level, they lobbied national governments, sought to create awareness about their cause, and tried to penetrate political party systems. The outcome of their efforts depended largely upon the political opportunity structures of the host country as well as its relations with the Turkish state. Each European country reacted differently to Kurdish demands. At the supranational level, however, the Kurdish lobby can be said to have been relatively more successful.

The political opportunities available pushed the Kurds to find ways to enter the European system and adapt their strategies accordingly, which finally led to what Renard terms the "Europeanization of the Kurdish Movement." According to him: "Europeanization consists of the development and use of a Kurdish network in Europe, whose aim is to promote Kurdish rights in Turkey through the European supranational system" (Renard 2008).

Furthermore, as Eccarius-Kelly underlines, the European system contained of an array of institutions to lobby at the supranational level, including the European Parliament, the European Commission, the European Court of Justice, the Council of Europe, and the

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<sup>16</sup> See: [http://www.fedbir.co.uk/index.php?option=com\\_frontpage&Itemid=1](http://www.fedbir.co.uk/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1).

<sup>17</sup> See: <http://www.fedkom.nl/index.php?mainpage=1>.

<sup>18</sup> See: <http://www.nudem.dk/>.

European Court of Human Rights. Kurdish Diaspora activists, besides addressing Turkish and numerous European governmental officials with protests and lobbying activities at the local and national levels, also championed Kurdish political, cultural, and human rights at the supranational level (Eccarius-Kelly 2002: 92). In particular, Kurdish associations in Belgium have organized activities to raise awareness amongst European and Belgian politicians about the current situation of the Kurds in Turkey and elsewhere. For instance, they have offered proposals for a resolution to the problem, condemning the actions and approach of the Turkish state towards its Kurdish population, to the European Parliament. Consequently, their aim has been to attract the attention of European politicians who are particularly involved with the process surrounding Turkey's possible accession to the European Union.

Of the various EU institutions, the European Parliament is the one that most frequently places the Kurdish issue on its agenda. One reason for this could be its relative openness to the Kurdish lobby compared with other institutions. According to Eccarius-Kelly, another motivation behind this pragmatic alliance between the Kurdish activists in Europe and various European states could be the fact that the Kurdish issue gives European states an excuse to reject Turkish membership to the EU. She cites Germany and Greece as examples of this behavior (Eccarius-Kelly 2008: 8). The left- as well as the right-wing in Europe has supported the Kurdish cause for different reasons. Yet, the Kurdish Diaspora has ultimately gained strength in terms of being able to affect the attitudes of European institutions towards Turkey and, at the same time, gained an indirect voice in these institutions - especially with regard to influencing human rights policy discussions related to Turkish accession (Blatte 2003; Eccarius-Kelly 2008: 8).

For example, the European Parliament took the initiative of organizing the 6th Kurdish International Conference on "EU, Turkey and the Kurds" in February 2010. The conference called for the inclusion of all Kurdish parties and organizations, including the PKK cadre and Öcalan, in the resolution process of the Kurdish question in Turkey. It also called for the Turkish army to cease its military operations in the Kurdish populated

regions of Turkey.<sup>19</sup> At the end of the two-day debate, the delegates adopted the following resolutions:

- The Conference underlines its view that the resolution of the armed conflict between the Turkish State and the PKK can only come through political dialogue with representatives of the Kurdish people and the Turkish government;
- The government of Turkey should ensure that there is political space for dialogue between all peoples constituting the Turkish Republic on concrete, substantive issues such as constitutional reform, and the EU should assist; civil society groups specifically should be encouraged and supported to contribute to such a platform;
- The Conference urges Turkey to immediately stop using anti-terror legislation to criminalize and detain the legitimate representatives of the Kurdish people. We therefore call on the Turkish authorities to investigate and monitor prosecution of these cases and of all human rights defenders according to domestic and international law and for these cases to be dealt with expeditiously;
- The Conference notes the Turkish Government's Kurdish Initiative but also notes that it falls short because the government has failed to fully and genuinely consult with elected representatives of the Kurds and in the wider Turkish and Kurdish community;
- All parties to commit to a peaceful Newroz where Kurds are permitted to freely celebrate, associate and express themselves without fear or favor;
- The EU and international community should seriously facilitate the points made above.

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<sup>19</sup> "International Kurdish Conference in EP Asks for Peace in Turkey," *Ararat News & Publishing*, February 12, 2010. Available at: <http://www.araratnews.eu/nuce.php?aid=413>.

The EU Turkey Civic Commission (EUTCC) organized the 7th International Conference on the “EU, Turkey and the Kurds” at the EU Parliament in Brussels in November 2010. The conference ended with a resolution, reaffirming the above mentioned points in addition to others. Some of these include<sup>20</sup>:

- The Turkish state must end its continued use of articles of the criminal code to prosecute writers, journalists, intellectuals, lawyers and many other defenders of free speech. Turkish anti-terror and press laws such as Article 301 are still being used to restrict legitimate freedom of the press. The Conference calls on the EU to ensure that Turkey remove restrictions on freedom of expression from their legal framework entirely.
- The Conference asks the EU to closely monitor the number of investigations opened and prosecutions launched in Turkey in relation to the expression of non-violent opinions, including cases where these do not result in convictions and must allow the freedom of expression of Roj TV and other Kurdish media channels in Europe.
- The conference reiterates its call to the State of Turkey and the European Union to develop and promote a strategic plan for mother tongue education.

In conclusion, although there are rival Kurdish groups operating in Europe, they appear to have agreed upon one point: “creating a friction between the EU and Turkey that would push social and political reform in Turkey as long as Turkey wanted to become a member of the EU” (Eccarius-Kelly 2002: 93). Many today would agree that the Kurdish Diaspora made the Kurdish issue much more visible to an international audience and ensured it a place on the European Union agenda and beyond, especially after the 2000s, by acting as a social movement/advocacy group and using strategies such as lobbying European supranational and national institutions and politicians.

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<sup>20</sup> “The 7th international conference on EU, Turkey and the Kurds ends with resolution,” *ANF / firatnews.com*, November 21, 2010. Available at: <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2010/11/turkey3057.htm>.

### ***The Host Country-Home Country Impact on Kurdish Diaspora Mobilization***

The impact of the Kurdish lobby on EU institutions will remain meaningful as long as Turkey stays committed to its EU accession agenda. The success of Kurdish efforts at the national level in various European states also depends on various factors. For instance, the host country in which the Kurdish Diaspora bases its activities is highly influencing in determining the outcome of its efforts. The literature suggests that limitations to the Diaspora's mobilization tends to be determined by the political opportunity structures of the host country it finds itself in, however, these opportunity structures are also shaped by national interests (Hassanpour & Mojab 2005: 219).

First, one can argue that the approach of the host country to the Kurdish issue matters immensely. If the host country is sympathetic to the Kurdish cause, as in the case of the Sweden, the Kurdish Diaspora's lobbying activities and claims-making efforts can expect to meet with greater acceptance than they would in other countries, such as Germany or the UK, which are less sympathetic to Kurdish activism in their territory. For example, in Germany, violent protests, the occupation of embassies, and the blockading highways all severely damaged the Kurdish movement's reputation in the 1990s. While the Diaspora groups have worked toward ameliorating the Kurds' image in Germany, the post-September 11 security measures have set back the movements' activities. Security measures taken as a precaution against terrorism have led to the criminalization of many immigrant groups by state authorities. Kurds were one of the groups who were highly affected by the "anti-terrorism" frenzy, in the sense that the entire Kurdish movement was suddenly under scrutiny as a result of these new measures. As Sentas from the Campaign Against Criminalising Communities (CAMPACC) points out<sup>21</sup>:

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<sup>21</sup> Vicki Sentas, CAMPACC, The impact of 'terrorist organization' laws on Diaspora claims for self-determination, Presentation to Peoples in Motion: Self-determination and Secession, Belfast, June 5, 2010. She continues with the examples from the UK after the ban on the PKK under the terror law: "In the UK since the start of 2009 Kurdish communities have reported a massive rise in the harassment, intimidation, and detention without charges of community members who are active in Diaspora politics. Examples include people being stopped and searched under terror legislation for distributing legal newspapers and putting up posters for Kurdish events. At demonstrations, Kurds are repeatedly told that waving the Kurdish flag is an offence under the terror laws" (Sentas 2010).

he banning of the PKK has criminalized all mass-based and popular Kurdish political parties by association, and removed any legal platforms for political engagement for the Kurds. (Sentas 2010)

My interviews in Germany also revealed that many Kurds are now hesitant to join organizations that deal with homeland issues due to the risk of arrest or deportation. Secondly, the relations of the host country with Turkey are a determining factor in the scope of actions available to the Kurdish Diaspora. There has been constant pressure exerted by Turkey on several countries to put a ban on PKK-related organizations and TV channels. This list includes Fırat News Agency in the Netherlands, ROJ-Group and Denge Mezopotamya Radio in Belgium, ROJ TV and MMC TV in Denmark, Newroz TV in Norway, and Yeni Özgür Politika Newspaper in Germany (Eccarius-Kelly 2010). ROJ TV<sup>22</sup> is well-known on account of the persistence of the Turkish state's demands for its closure. Turkey has been putting serious pressure on Denmark to prevent ROJ TV from continuing its broadcasts. As *Hürriyet* reported, one Turkish official argued that:

A globally accepted fact is that the fight against terrorism also foresees stopping their means of propaganda and financing. Turkey will certainly continue to put pressure on Denmark to this end.<sup>23</sup>

A further example is Turkey's suspension of relations with the Netherlands due to the country's granting of permission to the Kurds to hold gatherings of the Kurdish National Congress (Ayata 2008). Another such incident occurred when Prime Minister Erdoğan spoke at a high profile security conference about the voluntary or involuntary support that the European countries give to the PKK, which he described as completely unacceptable to Turkish state (Eccarius-Kelly, 2010).

Thirdly, the national interests of the host country may contribute to shaping the attitude of the host state towards the Kurdish issue. For instance, Eccarius-Kelly (2008) argues

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<sup>22</sup> "Case overview: Denmark indicts Roj-TV for supporting terrorism," *Kurdistan Commentary*, September 7, 2010. Available at: <http://kurdistancommentary.wordpress.com/2010/09/07/case-overview-denmark-indicts-roj-tv-for-supporting-terrorism/>

<sup>23</sup> "Turkey unlikely to veto Rasmussen," *Hürriyet Daily News*, March 24, 2009. Available at: <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/domestic/11273527.asp>

that the Kurdish Diaspora might have been used as a political pawn by various European states, especially during the early 1990s, in order to delay Turkish accession to the European Union. Furthermore, she argues that some of these states in fact have no genuine interest in resolving the Kurdish issue (2008: 8). Therefore, the mobilization of the Kurdish movement by the Kurds in Europe is still very dependent upon various external factors that define its limits. Relations between the EU and Turkey, or between individual European member states and Turkey, may cause fluctuations in the success of Kurdish lobbying activities.

### ***Protest & Propaganda Strategies Used by the Kurdish Diaspora in Europe and Beyond***

Since 1982, not a month has passed without a pro-Kurdish demonstration occurring in a European country, and the average number of protests annually may be close to several hundred (Grojean 2011: 182). The Kurdish Diaspora employed a number of techniques to motivate their own followers as well as to make their voices heard in their host country and throughout Europe.<sup>24</sup> These methods are listed below, and various examples are provided for each.

#### *Organizing Petitions & Campaigns*

Organizing petitions and campaigns is one of the main political strategies used by the Kurdish Diaspora in Europe. As Renard (2008) notes, the Kurdish Diaspora usually addresses the European Council, the Council of the European Union, the European

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<sup>24</sup> Although these methods are mostly used by the PKK or organizations that sympathize with it, there are also other Kurdish organizations which, from time to time, gave their support to these initiatives or organized their own campaigns.

Parliament, the European Commission, the European Court of Justice, the Council of Europe, and the European Court of Human Rights. In addition, the individual European states where each group resides can be the targets of petitions and campaigns.

For example, a campaign was organized by the Association of Kurdish Organizations in Europe (KON-KURD), which has an office in Brussels. In 2001, a campaign was organized to show support for the PKK. Signatures were gathered, and there were self-declarations such as: "I am PKK," or "I support the new line of PKK," which were handed over to the official authorities (Blatte 2003: 19). Another example, at the Copenhagen European Council in December 2002, the Kurdistan Human Rights Project (KHRP)<sup>25</sup>, a London-based organization fighting for Kurdish human rights, sent a 13-page report to the Danish EU Presidency stating that Turkey had still did not fulfilled the Copenhagen criteria in regarding the protection of human rights (Blatte 2003: 13). It also filed a lawsuit against Turkey at the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), in pursuit of compensation for repeated Turkish bombings and attacks in northern Iraq (Renard 2008). Furthermore, the Kurdish Institute of Paris published a declaration in the *International Herald Tribune* on December 8, 2004 entitled "What do the Kurds want in Turkey?" It was signed by numerous intellectuals, politicians, and important figures from various European countries. The last sentence of the statement stated:

We ask the Turkish authorities and the European leaders to do justice to the Kurds in Turkey by acceding their legitimate demands in order to ensure regional peace and stability, and to consider the fulfillment of those

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<sup>25</sup> See: [www.khrp.org](http://www.khrp.org).

demands to be an essential criterion by which to measure Turkey's progress along the road to membership of the European Union.<sup>26</sup>

In addition, the European Kurdish Platform published a report to attract the attention of European leaders, yet it took a more radical stance than the Kurdish Institute of Paris. The report argued that attempts are being made to resolve the problems of the Kurdish people through the granting of human rights or cultural autonomy, when what they are really asking for is an independent country. The report also invited the UN to become actively involved in the Kurdish issue.<sup>27</sup>

Since the capture of Öcalan, petitions and campaigns have been used more frequently by the Kurdish Diaspora. They may be used to support either the "Freedom for Öcalan" movement or any other issue related to the Kurdish cause. For instance, one of the most recent petitions to be circulated concerned the banning of ROJ TV. There were several protests organized in Sweden and Germany in 2010, and petitions have been circulated in order to overturn the ban. For example, one such petition that attracted many signatures carried the heading: "Denouncing Belgian Government's fascist attack on Roj TV."<sup>28</sup>

Right before and after June 2010, many campaigns were targeted to the elections in Turkey. A declaration was made by YEKKOM on June 1, 2010, detailing Kurdish demands and expectations from the elections. The declaration focused on the problems that the Kurdish population has been facing in Turkey and contained demands such as lowering the election threshold for political parties to enter the Grand National

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<sup>26</sup> "What do the Kurds Want in Turkey" *Kurdish Institute of Paris*, December 8, 2004. Available at: [http://www.institutkurde.org/activites\\_culturelles/appels/what\\_do\\_the\\_kurds\\_want\\_in\\_turkey/](http://www.institutkurde.org/activites_culturelles/appels/what_do_the_kurds_want_in_turkey/).

<sup>27</sup> See: <http://www.wekurd.com/AREPORTONTHEPLATFORMOFKURDSINEUROPE.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> See: <http://www.gopetition.com/petition/34506.html>.

Assembly of Turkey, paying reparations to the Kurdish population who were subjected to forced displacement, and the adoption of a new constitution. The declaration also prompted a signature campaign, which received signatures from numerous German intellectuals and politicians.<sup>29</sup>

### *Organizing Violent/Nonviolent Mass Demonstrations & Sit-ins*

Kurdish demonstrations are usually organized by one or more groups.<sup>30</sup> These demonstrations typically take the form of nonviolent protests in order to more positively influence public opinion and attract the attention of policymakers. Still, there have been cases where demonstrations have turned violent due to tensions between the police and demonstrators or between demonstrators and rival groups (for instance, between Kurds and Turks). The Kurds have launched demonstrations in order to provoke policy changes in both Turkey and the European country in which they reside, depending on the context. Various demonstrations have directly targeted either the European Union or the United Nations.

Among the Kurds of the Diaspora, demonstrations are highly popular, especially in the aftermath of critical junctures and important symbolic events. Different Diaspora groups have organized various demonstrations in Germany to protest the political situation and attitude of the Turkish government towards the violation of minority rights in Turkey. For instance, as Burkay points out, the Kurdish march in Bonn in the 1990s was one of the biggest and most peaceful demonstrations ever organized by the Kurdish Diaspora. Eight different Kurdish groups, including ones that sympathize with the PSK (Socialist

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<sup>29</sup> See: <http://www.yekkom.com/html/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=164>.

<sup>30</sup> For example PKK sympathizer groups with non-PKK groups, or indeed completely independent groups.

Party of Kurdistan) and the PKK, joined the march. According to Burkay, around 200,000 Kurds participated in the event. Similar demonstrations have occurred in Stockholm and London.<sup>31</sup> Another march was organized recently in Strasbourg—on February 15, 2011—in order to protest the detainment of Öcalan. Participants came from several European countries to join the march organized by FEYKA-KURDISTAN in France. An estimated 40,000-50,000 Kurds from all over Europe joined the march.

A commonly cited example of a violent demonstration occurred when the ban on the PKK was enacted in Germany in 1993. This event ended with large scale demonstrations by the Diaspora members (Curtis 2005: 8), and violent demonstrations also took place immediately following the ban. On this occasion, Kurds were demonstrating both against Turkey as well Germany:

In March 1996, thousands of Kurds throughout Germany used the Kurdish New Year celebrations to protest against the situation in Turkey. The outcome was violent in Dortmund, 40 police officers and 300 demonstrators were injured, 600 were arrested, and 1900 temporarily held. After this, the German government announced it would deport foreigners who take part in illegal demonstrations.<sup>32</sup>

Kurdish Diaspora activists have also used the sit-in strategy to draw attention to their cause. As Lyon & Uçarer (2001) have shown:

In the early 1990s, blocking highways and disrupting traffic on the famed German *Autobahn* became a trademark tactic for Kurdish demonstrators. At times, highway blocks occurred at the Franco-German border where demonstrators crossed the border on foot and proceeded to walk towards their destination on the highway. ... the highway between Karlsruhe and

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<sup>31</sup> "Geçmisten Bir Sayfa," Kemal Burkay, *Denge Kurdistan*, March 13, 2010. Available at: <http://www.gelawej.net/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=3084>

<sup>32</sup> See: [http://www.hamline.edu/cla/academics/international\\_studies/Diaspora/kurds/paper.html](http://www.hamline.edu/cla/academics/international_studies/Diaspora/kurds/paper.html). Accessed July 2011.

Stuttgart was likewise blocked on March 22, 1994 in an event that was later linked to PKK.

A sit-in was also organized by the Kurdish Diaspora immediately after Germany issued a ban on the PKK as a “terrorist group” in 1993. Protesters organized a sit-in right in front of the Turkish consulate in Karlsruhe, which escalated into attempts to break in to the Consulate and clashes with police.

The capture of Öcalan was also a very critical juncture. Most of the violent demonstrations occurred soon after Öcalan was arrested by Turkish forces. There were various violent protests, as well as attacks on Turkish properties, embassies, consulates and shops in several European countries. The violent protests occasionally led to occupations. Right after the capture of Öcalan, some Kurdish Diaspora groups occupied the Turkish and Greek embassies and consulates in several countries in order to protest his arrest. The role of Mossad, the Israeli secret service, in Öcalan’s arrest also incited anger amongst the European Kurdish community. In Germany, 200 Kurdish protesters attempted to occupy the Israeli consulate and security guards opened fire. In total, 4 Kurds were killed and 20 more were injured. In Heilbronn, Germany, Diaspora activists who supported the PKK threw Molotov cocktails at a Turkish cultural center and attacked some Turks with baseball bats. Similar incidents unfolded in different parts of Germany despite threats of deportation.<sup>33</sup> Violent episodes also occurred between Turkish and Kurdish Diaspora groups in various European cities. In Oslo, a fight broke out between Kurdish and Turkish protesters and ended only after Norwegian police intervened. This happened in November 2007—immediately after Iraq sanctioned

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33 “Europe Kurds Continue German Protests,” *BBC*, February 19, 1999. Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/281821.stm>.

Turkey to continue its war against PKK militant bases in Northern Iraq.<sup>34</sup> The most recent violent protests transpired immediately after the arrests of members of a Kurdish organization alleged to have links to the PKK. There have been nonviolent protests as well as violent ones in Paris in which protestors have burned cars, launched Molotov cocktails, and occupied a train station.

### *Hunger Strikes & Self-Immolation*

The hunger strike is also a well-known tactic that has been used by the Kurdish Diaspora since the earliest days of the Kurdish struggle. It became a more widely-used in order to draw public attention to the prison conditions and treatment of Öcalan. In 2007, over 80,000 Kurds signed a petition calling on the Council of Europe to send an independent team of doctors to the İmralı prison where Öcalan was being held to determine if he was being poisoned. Following the signing of the petition, they went on a hunger strike in front of the Council of Europe headquarters in Strasbourg.<sup>35</sup> Also, in 2009, members of the Kurdish community held a hunger strike outside Parliament Square in London. They were protesting against the “inhumane treatment” of Abdullah Öcalan.<sup>36</sup>

In Germany, Bedriye Taş and Nilgün Yıldırım burned themselves to death in protest of Germany and Turkey’s treatment of the Kurdish population (Aydın 2005). Also, in 1999, a 14-year-old girl in London set herself on fire after the capture of Öcalan to protest his capture and the Turkish policies towards the Kurds in the eastern part of Turkey. Her

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<sup>34</sup> “Oslo Turkish-Kurdish Protest,” *Islam in Europe*, November 3, 2007. Available at: <http://islamineurope.blogspot.com/2007/11/oslo-turkishkurdish-protest.html>.

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/EU+parliamentarians%3A+80,000+people+demand+Kurdish+leader+Ocalan+be...-a01611353633>, Accessed July 2011.

<sup>36</sup> “Kurdish community hold hunger Strike in Parliament Square,” *Demotix*, December 8, 2009. Available at: <http://www.demotix.com/news/hunger-strike-parliament-square>.

aim was to draw the attention of the British public and the media to the Kurdish cause in Turkey. She later explained that she had wanted the British public to think about the Kurdish population. These were not the only incidents that displayed Kurdish concern over Öcalan's capture. At the time, many Kurds claimed that, if necessary, they would kill themselves in trying to free their leader.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Alternative Mechanisms for the Promotion of the "Kurdish Cause"***

Aside from lobbying European political institutions and organizing protests in European cities, Kurdish groups and individuals used additional mechanisms to draw attention to their cause. Individual initiatives as well as group efforts are enormously helpful in spreading awareness about the Kurdish issue in Europe. Below, I list a number of these mechanisms.

#### *Kurdish Politicians*

There are numerous Kurds in Europe who managed to enter the political circles of their adopted countries and serve in political positions throughout European municipalities, local councils, national parliaments, and supranational institutions. While some of these Kurdish politicians have chosen not to try to push the Kurdish issue onto their party's political agenda, a great majority of them have brought the problems the Kurds are facing today into their parliaments and assemblies. In light of the fact that many of these politicians were elected as a result of the support they received from voters of Kurdish origin, it is not surprising that they have sought to promote these issues. Many Kurdish organizations naturally support Kurdish candidates and Kurdish-friendly candidates.

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<sup>37</sup> Kim Sengupta, "Hour by hour, a new Kurd attack," The Independent, February 17, 1999. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/hour-by-hour-a-new-kurd-attack-1071302.html>.

For instance, KOMKAR in April 2010 published a declaration inviting people to become more politically active. The declaration underlined that in order to develop a more successful lobby, more Kurds need to vote and when they do, they should vote for patriotic Kurds or Kurdish-friendly candidates.<sup>38</sup> Some examples of Kurdish politicians in Europe are: Gülan Avcı in Sweden, who served in the parliament as an MP from the Liberal People's Party (*Folk Partiet*); Özlem Sara Çekiç from the Social Populist Party in Denmark; Roza Güçlü Hedin from Sweden; and Feleknaş Uca from Germany.

### *Kurdish Academics*

In recent years, Kurdish academics have gained a very visible presence throughout European academic circles. There are numerous academics of Kurdish origin in Europe who focus their publishing efforts on drawing attention to the Kurdish issue. The descendants of Kurdish immigrants, as well as Turkish citizens of Kurdish origin who did not believe they could not express themselves freely in Turkey, chose to reside in Europe and conduct research related to Kurds within various fields, from political economy to human rights law, and from Kurdish folk music to Kurdish literature. Examples of well-known Kurdish scholars include İsmail Beşikçi<sup>39</sup> and Mesut Yeğen<sup>40</sup>, who have experienced hardships in publishing on issues related to Kurdish rights in public university structures in Turkey, discourages Kurdish academics who are in the

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<sup>38</sup> KOMKAR-EU, "Avrupa ülkelerindeki seçimlerde yurtsever Kürtlere ve Kürt dostlarına oy verin," *Denge Azad*, April 27, 2010. Available at:

<http://www.dengeazad.com/en/NewsDetailN.aspx?id=4011&LinkID=117>

<sup>39</sup> For more information on Beşikçi see: "The Court's decision against Dr. İsmail Beşikçi can't be accepted...", March 8, 2011. Available at: <http://www.kurdishinstitute.be/english/1838.html>.

<sup>40</sup> "Nasil Profesör Olunur?" *Radikal*, February 13, 2011. Available at: <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalEklerDetayV3&ArticleID=1039888&Date=16.03.2011&CategoryID=42>

Diaspora for a possible return and makes them opt for remaining in Europe to pursue their research.

### *Kurdish Media*

Today, there is far more diversity in the Kurdish diasporic media, which still plays a significant role in mobilizing Kurds for the Kurdish cause. There have been around 160-70 websites (according to an interviewee from Berlin) created in Europe that are being followed regularly by many Kurds. Some are pro-PKK, while others are highly critical about its actions; a number of them, however, are more academic and neutral. The Kurds have also initiated an extensive publishing campaign by forming publishing houses that produce texts in Kurdish all throughout Europe. A significant development in terms of the expansion of Kurdish media in Europe occurred in 2009, when *Le Monde diplomatique* began printing news articles in Kurdish. It is prepared by a professional group based in Berlin that is highly meticulous about the use of the Kurdish language. In an interview Kadir Satık—one of the owners—underlined the fact that they were attempting to pave the way for a standardization of the Kurdish language.<sup>41</sup>

### *Kurdish Cinema*

Kurdish films have become increasingly visible in European movie festivals over the last decade thanks to the directors, producers, and scriptwriters who have been vocal about their “Kurdish identity.” Mustafa Gündoğdu, in his article “An Introduction to Kurdish Cinema,” mentions that the key phrase “directors in the Diaspora” entered the lexicon of the literature on Kurdish cinema via Kurdish filmmakers living in exile from the 1990s and onwards. Kurds from Turkey as well as those from Iraq, Syria, and Iran produced

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<sup>41</sup> See: <http://www.lemonde-kurdi.com/>.

movies with themes that dealt with the political situation of Kurds living in these countries. Kurdish film festivals all around Europe as well as in America and Australia helped the Kurds to raise international awareness for their movement. Gündoğdu claims that Kurdish directors have used their cinema to make a political statement. He lists Kurdish directors who were born in Europe, such as Binevsa Berivan from Belgium, Ayten Mutlu Saray from Switzerland, and Özay Şahin from Germany (Gündoğdu 2010). Kurdish film festivals held in European cities such as Berlin, Stockholm, and London, which aimed to call Diaspora Kurds back to their roots and to increase international awareness of the Kurds' plight, drew noteworthy attention. Moreover, Kurdish directors have won several prizes at international movie festivals. One such director is Yüksel Yavuz, who studied cinema in Hamburg and had his film shown at Cannes in 2002. He also directed a documentary entitled *Close up Kurdistan*<sup>42</sup>, which has aired on several European TV channels (Aktaş 2009: 65).

### *Kurdish Music*

A recent thesis by Balca Arda on Kurdish musicians also reveals interesting facts about musicians of the Diaspora. There are numerous Kurdish musicians who migrated to European countries such as Belgium and Germany to perform Kurdish music. Arda mentions the "Academy" in Munich, the Kurdish Institute and the Mesopotamia Democratic Movement of Culture (*Tevgera Demokratik ya Çand û Huner ê Mezopotamya; TEVÇAND*) in Cologne, ROJ TV and the MMC, a Kurdish music channel, in Brussels, all of which contribute to the dissemination of Kurdish culture, and particularly Kurdish music. In describing the profile of some of the Kurdish musicians in the Diaspora, Arda

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<sup>42</sup> The name of the film was changed to "Close up Kurds" when it was released in Turkey, as it was problematic to use the word "Kurdistan." See: <http://2009.ifistanbul.com/filmler/close-up-kurds.aspx>.

makes clear the fact that many had left Turkey in order to avoid legal punishment or to escape military service, while others are descendants of Kurdish immigrants in Europe. She claims that they appreciate Europe's support of multiculturalism and freedom of expression, which has helped them to publicize and promote the Kurdish movement through Kurdish art (Arda 2010).

*Seminars on Kurdish History and Culture and the Kurdish Experience with the Turkish State*

There are international and national seminars organized by the Diaspora elite in order to raise awareness of Turkish state policies towards the Kurdish population in Turkey or even in Europe. One recent example is the "Dersim Conference," which took place in Berlin on November 24 2010 and hosted a discussion of the events that took place in Dersim in 1938.<sup>43</sup> Popular figures from Turkey were invited, including Hasan Cemal, Cengiz Çandar, and Yaşar Kemal, and German politicians participated in the conference as well. Another example is the joint conference regarding the use of torture at Diyarbakır Prison organized by Amnesty International with the participation of Mehdi Zana, and Recep and Nuran Maraşlı.<sup>44</sup> As demonstrated, using the above-mentioned methods, the Kurdish Diaspora has kept its issues at the forefront of the agenda and ensured that host country politicians could not neglect the relevant events and developments in Turkey concerning the Kurdish cause. Finally, these alternative

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<sup>43</sup> Dersimer Flüchtlinge in Berlin – Der Genozid quält den Kopf an jedem Tag: DIE ANERKENNUNG DER MASSENTÖTUNGEN 1937/ 1938 in DERSIM als VÖLKERMORD. Available at: <http://www.kurdinberlin.info/pdf/dersim-konferanz.pdf>.

<sup>44</sup> Amnesty International-Veranstaltung mit Mehdi Zana, "Hölle Nr. 5" Tagebuch aus dem türkischen Gefängnis mit dem Autor Mehdi ZANA.

mechanisms may reach more people and influence opinions in a less problematic way than does the method of violent protest.

## 5. The Kurdish Diaspora's Approach to the AKP

### *Diaspora Perceptions about the AKP*

In this section, I will briefly try to identify the different points of view that can be found within the Diaspora regarding recent developments in Turkey, especially since the AKP came to power. There can be no doubt that the AKP's approach to the Kurdish question is a significant and critical issue in Turkish politics. Moving beyond the debate as to whether the AKP has succeeded in implementing its policies and reforms, we have certainly reached the end of an era regarding the Kurdish question. At present, while the problem still exists, what has changed is the way it is being handled. The AKP's approach to the Kurdish question, i.e., its initiation of reforms and the "Kurdish opening," paved the way for discussion of several subjects that were previously considered taboo in Turkey. In the end, however, such developments could not hide the disappointment experienced by the Kurdish population as a result of these failed AKP policies, nor could they disguise the fact that the Kurdish opening has been declared "dead" by many Kurdish groups, Turkish and Kurdish activists, as well as international media and academic circles in Turkey and abroad.

Since the AKP came to power, some reforms have been carried out regarding the situation of the Kurds, as the AKP has vied to be the front-runner in brokering a solution to the Kurdish question (Özcan 2009: 4). For instance, early in 2009, a state-owned TV channel (TRT 6) was launched and began broadcasting in Kurdish, while Kurdish

centers at several universities in heavily Kurdish-populated areas were formed. However, various recent developments in Turkey regarding the Kurdish issue raised doubts as to the sincerity of these AKP-led reforms. For example, the fact that numerous Kurdish children faced jail sentences on charges that they used violence, such as throwing stones against the security forces, has raised concern among the Kurdish population. Furthermore, high-profile Kurdish politicians and rights defenders, amongst them popular politicians, were accused of being the urban wing of the PKK (known as the KCK) and were imprisoned.<sup>45</sup> According to Çiçek (2011: 15-16), for instance:

...while it has been stated that the government's democratic initiative has aimed to find a peaceful and political solution to the Kurdish issue and to achieve disarmament of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the limits of the political sphere have become much narrower in regards to the pro-Kurdish politics.

Many similar examples can be found that raise suspicions about the government's true feelings toward the Kurds. As the Kurdish Diaspora closely follows developments in Turkey, these events also help to shape the Diaspora's stance towards the AKP. Needless to say, the reactions of various Diaspora members to the above-mentioned developments were diverse. Based on fieldwork observations and extensive online research on diasporic websites, I categorize the main ideas expressed into the following two groups:

- The approach of Diaspora members who are sympathetic to the PKK: They are displeased with everything the AKP has done so far, and they label the Diaspora groups/members who are sympathetic towards AKP reforms as "traitors," "collaborators," or "Kurds who have been deceived by the AKP's lies."

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<sup>45</sup> "151 Kurds charged in Turkey over PKK-rebels links," *Kurd Net*, June 18, 2010. Available at: <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2010/6/turkey2718.htm>.

- The approach of Diaspora members who are suspicious of the AKP: They still support the reforms and the referendum, as it gives some opportunities to the Kurds to fight for their own cause, but they do not trust the AKP regarding the Kurdish question.

The fieldwork that inspired this report has been finalized six months before the June 12, 2011 elections. Therefore, interviewees were not asked questions related to any election or post-election developments in Turkey. I have, however, observed a shift from the second group to the first, as the situation in Turkey following the elections made Kurds even more suspicious of the AKP's policies towards them. Following discussions on Diaspora blogs and various organizations' web pages, I have observed that some groups or individuals who had relatively softer opinions than the Kurdish organizations sympathetic to the PKK did regarding the possibility for future AKP reforms have begun to change their position and start giving their support to the "Labor, Democracy and Peace Block." This was true especially after the Hatip Dicle incident, in which an elected Kurdish politician was forbid from entering parliament. Instead, the Turkish Supreme Court approved a one-year-eight-month prison term on charges of providing propaganda support to an armed terrorist organization.<sup>46</sup> There have been protests, press releases, conferences, and seminars all around Europe about these recent developments in Turkey; however, these do not fall within the scope of this study.

### ***TRT 6 & the September 12, 2010 Referendum***

During my fieldwork, I posed questions about the referendum of September 2010 and the new channel TRT 6, which is the first state-owned television channel to broadcast in

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<sup>46</sup> "Dicle can't enter parliament even if elected as independent MP as terrorism conviction upheld," *Cumhuriyet*, June 9, 2011. Available at: <http://www.cumhuriyet.com/?hn=251620>.

Kurdish 24 hours a day. There were conflicting opinions about this new Kurdish TV channel. An interviewee from Sweden who sympathizes with the PKK argued:

TRT 6 is a joke. It is the AKP's way of making Kurds watch meaningless TV shows so they won't watch ROJ TV anymore. All they broadcast all day is Islamic propaganda. I do not support it at all.

Another respondent from Berlin, who has close ties with PKK-affiliated organizations, said:

It certainly will be their propaganda mechanism. The AKP wants to prevent young people from sympathizing with the PKK. They will use it as an excuse to tell the Kurds that they should no longer complain because their language is now free. I am afraid this is going to increase their votes and that BDP votes will be lowered. That is why I do not support TRT 6.

On the other hand, during my interviews in Germany, a Kurdish activist and former member of Rizgari stated that:

No matter what the others say, TRT 6 is a very big step. It is the end of a taboo in Turkey. We fought so much in the 1970s. For what? To be able to say 'Kurds exist!' And now we are given a TV channel. Why would I reject it outright? One should see it at least as a contribution to the spread of the Kurdish language.

One Kurdish university student in Sweden responded to my question in the following manner:

My cousin just told me the other day that he can watch Sivan Perwer or Ciwan Haco on TRT 6. I didn't believe him, but maybe it is true. It is hard to believe for me because my father was arrested for playing Kurdish music before he migrated to Sweden...The fact that the Turkish state finally has understood that the Kurds exist within Turkish borders is a significant change. I do not care if it is the AKP or another party who did it, it should be appreciated.

Most of the Kurdish Diaspora members I interviewed agreed that TRT 6 has “more of a symbolic value than any actual importance” for the Kurds. As another interviewee from Sweden put it:

Come on! Was it only a TV channel that the Kurds needed after all this struggle? No! We already had 15 TV channels before TRT 6. But it is good for the Turks...TRT 6 is working as an ‘opening’ for the Turkish minds, not for the Kurds. They will understand how different we are and how we are not the same.

From the fieldwork results, I identified a common Kurdish perception: that establishing a television channel was in no way going to satisfy the Kurds who have fought for their rights over the last few decades, but it *was* accepted as a symbolic act. Many of the interviewees emphasized that while they were well aware that the channel constitutes “AKP propaganda,” they nonetheless appreciate it because, at a minimum, it acknowledges a distinct Kurdish identity and Kurdish language.

As to the referendum, there was a fierce debate amongst Diaspora members. There was a virtual online-battle about the stance that Kurds in Turkey should take towards the referendum, which was held on September 12, 2010. KOMKAR organized a Europe-wide meeting in order to discuss the referendum process. According to several Kurdish websites, over 60 big names in Kurdish politics in exile in Europe participated in the meeting. At the end of the conference, a declaration was released that stated voting “yes” to the referendum is to vote in favor of the Kurds and the boycott, and that voting “no” can only bring hardship to the Kurds in the long run. The participants of the conference were critical towards the AKP government on the following issues:

- The “Kurdish initiative” only made superficial changes but did not tackle the heart of the issues;
- The “Kurdish initiative” contains no substantial proposals about how to solve the Kurdish question.

However:

- The AKP reforms might lead to a more democratic environment in Turkey, which is a development that should be supported;
- The Kurds should choose between two conflicting parties (Kemalists as supporters of the status quo and the AKP as supporters of change); moreover, this choice should be the AKP, not necessarily to ally with them, but to make space for the Kurds to democratically lay out their claims;
- A contingent alliance with the anti-status quo groups will be in the Kurds’ favor in the long run.<sup>47</sup>

The PKK, YEK-KOM, and KON-KURD boycotted the conference organized by KOMKAR and issued a press release stating their belief that this conference only serves the interests of the AKP.<sup>48</sup> The circles closer to the PKK had produced propaganda before the referendum for the “BOYCOTT” campaign of the BDP in Turkey. Furthermore, the major left-leaning migrant umbrella organizations in Europe produced a joint declaration warning people to “beware of AKP deception on the referendum and boycott it.” The organizations that signed the document are:

- Platform for European Mass Democratic Organizations (*Avrupa Demokratik Kitle Örgütleri Platformu; DEKÖP-A*)
- The Confederation for European Democratic Justice (*Avrupa Demokratik Haklar Konfederasyonu; ADHK*)
- The Confederation of Repressed European Immigrants (*Avrupa Ezilen Göçmenler Konfederasyonu; AvEG-Kon*)
- The World Lives Newspaper (*Yaşanacak Dünya Gazetesi*)

<sup>47</sup> Declaration by KOMKAR EU, August 29, 2010.

<sup>48</sup> “Diaspora Kürt Konferansı” toplanıyor,” August 28, 2010.

- The Confederation of European-Turkish Workers (*Avrupa Türkiyeli İşçiler Konfederasyonu; ATİK*)
- The Federation of Kurdish Associations in Germany (*Almanya Kürt Dernekleri Federasyonu; YEK-KOM*)<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, authors such as Kadir Satık<sup>50</sup>, a former member of the Rizgari movement who is currently leading the Kurdish language section of *Le Monde Diplomatique* in Berlin, stated that the referendum was a big step for Turkish society in ridding itself of the legacy of September 12, 1980 (the date of Turkey's third coup d'état), at least symbolically. However, the referendum essentially had nothing to do with the Kurdish population; thus, the best strategy for the Kurds to pursue would be one of indifference, rather than taking sides or engaging in a boycott. He argued that if the Kurds wanted to contribute to Turkish democracy, they could have voted "yes," but they should have known that the referendum could not ensure a positive outcome for the situation of the Kurds in Turkey (Satık 2010). As the examples cited above prove, we cannot talk about a common Kurdish stance or a representative Kurdish voice concerning developments in Turkey. However, it should be noted that support for the boycott was much stronger in Europe.

### ***AKP Dialogue with the Diaspora***

In order to initiate cooperation with the Kurdish Diaspora, the AKP had taken steps such as opening a dialogue with Kemal Burkay to secure his return to Turkey from exile. As a well-known Kurdish politician who has been living in exile in Sweden for the last 40

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<sup>49</sup>"Anayasa Referandumunu Boykot Edelim," *ADHK*, September 2010. Available at: [http://www.adhk.eu/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=450:anayasa-referandumunu-boykot-edelm](http://www.adhk.eu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=450:anayasa-referandumunu-boykot-edelm).

<sup>50</sup>Kadir Satık, "Referandum ve Ak Parti," *Rizgari Online*, October 24, 2010. Available at: [http://english.rizgari.com/modules.php?name=Rizgari\\_Niviskar&cmd=read&id=2155](http://english.rizgari.com/modules.php?name=Rizgari_Niviskar&cmd=read&id=2155)

years, his return to Turkey would carry a symbolic weight and aid in the movement towards conflict resolution between the Turkish state and the Kurds. Furthermore, AKP deputies made an offer to the most popular Kurdish singer, Sivan Perwer, who is also in exile and is known for his impact on the creation of ethnic-awareness on the Kurdish people through his music. Perwer received a request from Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç to hold a televised concert on TRT 6, the sole state-sponsored Kurdish TV channel. However, the mere fact that he had met with Turkish state officials sparked discussion amongst Kurds - both in Turkey and in Europe. Websites and newspapers close to the PKK published articles condemning Perwer as a traitor to his own people.<sup>51</sup> His dialogue with the government resulted in several attacks being launched against him in the media, especially from the pro-PKK Kurdish media.<sup>52</sup>

While discussing the AKP's dialogue with the Kurdish Diaspora, we should recall that the AKP government still refuses to engage in any *open* or *official* dialogue with pro-PKK groups, even those in the Diaspora. Among the members of the Kurdish community in Europe, I have observed a particular anxiety about this behavior. This fact has been

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<sup>51</sup> "Kurdish singer says PKK and supporters are the real traitors," February 17, 2011.

[http://us.zaman.com.tr/us-tr/newsDetail\\_getNewsById.action?newsId=46068](http://us.zaman.com.tr/us-tr/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=46068)

<sup>52</sup> Within a few hours of the first press-release of the news about the meeting, groups were formed on Facebook which depicted Perwer as a traitor. He started to receive death threats. These kinds of reactions also happened in Turkey towards the Kurdish intellectuals who supported the Kurdish opening initiated by the government. In March, 41 Kurdish intellectuals and activists issued a joint-declaration condemning current death threats by the PKK against Kurdish writers Muhsin Kızılkaya and Mehmet Metiner, and the Kurdish singer Sivan Perwer. The declaration also condemned the death threats that Orhan Miroğlu, a Kurdish intellectual who resides in Turkey, and Kemal Burkay who is currently in exile in Sweden, received from PKK supporters. See "Kurdish intellectuals condemn PKK threats, intimidation," *Today's Zaman*, March 11, 2011. Available at: <http://todayszaman.com/news-237840-kurdish-intellectuals-condemn-pkk-threats-intimidation.html>.

interpreted as a bad omen by members of Diaspora who support the PKK. A member of an organization that supports the PKK in Sweden said:

The government is not negotiating with the Kurds. They are negotiating with the “good” Kurds...They very well know that a solution is only possible with us, but they do not come to us. They cannot...

Another Kurdish activist who used to be involved in organizations with links to the PKK in Germany claimed:

They are not trying to resolve anything. They are trying to divide the Kurds. They will sit down and watch while we (the rival Kurdish groups) fight and finally finish each other off. That is the AKP resolution.

To sum up, if we must generalize, there are two main camps in the Diaspora regarding recent developments in Turkey: supporters of the PKK, or Diaspora members who do not necessarily have organic ties to the organization but sympathize with it and Diaspora members who are not pro-PKK. The latter group is highly heterogeneous, and most of them exhibit a hesitant approach towards the AKP, but they appreciate the supposedly more liberal political environment that the Kurds enjoy today, despite incidents such as the KCK trials. However, one should be reminded again that these interviews were conducted prior to February 2010, and, since then, some participants in this study may have changed their minds or lost their enthusiasm with regards to the “Kurdish initiative” in the post-election political climate of Turkey. The majority of respondents from both camps agree that the new reforms are far from satisfying Kurdish demands. Suggestions for a possible resolution to the conflict include: truth commissions, the right to education in Kurdish, and, lastly, the BDP’s plan for Kurdish democratic autonomy.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, we may argue that the Kurdish Diaspora expanded the Kurdish issue across national borders. Owing to the political activism and lobbying activities of the Kurds in the Diaspora, the Kurdish issue became a “hot” topic in several EU countries, and the activities of the Diaspora members not only helped to raise awareness in host countries, but also amongst the Kurds who had not been previously politically mobilized. The advocacy and propaganda efforts to mobilize international support appeared to have worked, and the Diaspora managed to influence political and social discourse regarding the Kurdish issue in the homeland through its lobbying activities at EU institutions.

The Diaspora played a significant role in raising awareness; sometimes it directly supported the armed struggle of the PKK, and sometimes it engaged in identity preservation. At times, it fulfilled the role of peace breaker and, at times, the role of peace maker. Nonetheless, as demonstrated above, its capabilities have been limited by the control exerted by the Turkish state, as well as by the political opportunity structures offered by the current host countries.

The Diaspora is surely not a mirror image of the Kurds in Turkey, as their experience of being Kurdish is combined with their experience of being in exile. Moreover, living outside of the homeland and facing xenophobia and discrimination only adds to the bitterness of displacement. In fact, the Diaspora may be even less willing than the homeland population to compromise on critical issues pertaining to the Kurdish question. On the other hand, the Diaspora, having lived so far away from the conflict for

so long, might also play a role in the resolution process, as it might be able to take a more measured approach. Wherever we search for answers when considering the Kurds in Europe, we must eventually return to the heart of the problem: the situation faced by the Kurdish population in Turkey. Therefore, the essential questions asked in Turkey are also relevant for the Diaspora, and they remain at the core of the issue, even in Europe: Making peace with whom? Negotiating with whom? Who represents the Kurds?

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