

Religion and Armed Conflict: Evidence from the Kurdish Conflict in Turkey

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Abstract

This paper examines the effectiveness of religion as a solution to ethno-nationalist conflicts, drawing on the case of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK) in Turkey. We test for the purported peacemaking potential of religion building on an original dataset that contains data on Turkey's state-sponsored mosques between 1980 and 2016. Results from this dataset, coupled with an alternative measure of the state's involvement in religion – the number of religious schools (*imam-hatip*) per province – show that increased Islamization has no discernible impact on lowering support for ethno-nationalist Kurdish political parties or insurgency.

Introduction

Despite continued attempts at research, the relationship between religion and conflict remains ambiguous. One group of studies has drawn attention to how religion, particularly in cases where religion and ethnicity overlap, contributes to an increased risk war (Fox 2002; Bose 2007; Basedau et al. 2011), longer and deadlier conflicts (Toft 2007), and a dimmer prospect for peaceful resolution (Svensson 2007). Others, have highlighted peaceful teachings and practices of forgiveness in religious traditions (Appleby 2000; Philpott 2012) that can help build peace as well as democracy (Philpott 2007; Sandal 2011; Driessen 2010).

These diametrically opposed views reflect the fact that religions “are susceptible to different readings in different contexts and become entangled in or influenced by newer sociopolitical context” (Soleimani 2016: 25). Drawing on the case of the Sierra Leonean civil war, one study shows how religion played various roles such as “instigator,” “justifier,” and “reconciler” during and after the war (Conteh 2011: 55). Religion seems to be equally capable of serving as a cause of violence as well as a source for peace due to the various schools of thought found in each religion (Appleby 2000).

While these works have greatly contributed to our understanding of the complex relationship religion has with conflict, they build largely on qualitative case studies or draw on cross-sectional data to shed light on the role religion plays in a conflict. Additionally, many of these studies offer detailed examinations of armed conflicts involving non-Muslim groups (e.g., Northern Ireland; South Africa) or cases that include groups hailing from different faiths [e.g., Sudan (1983-2005); Sri Lanka (1983-2009)].

In this study, we draw on the case of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK) insurgency in Turkey (1984-ongoing), one of the longest and most complicated

ethnic civil wars in the post-World War II era involving two Muslim-majority peoples, to systematically examine the effectiveness of religion as a solution to ethnonationalist conflicts. Utilizing insights from the current literature, we offer a theoretical argument for the contextual nature of the religion–conflict relationship to highlight how conflict dynamics weaken religion’s peacemaking potential in ethno-nationalist conflicts that involve coreligionists.

We support our argument by using a mixed-methods approach to better uncover the causal mechanisms at work (Brookes 2017). Specifically, in addition to offering a detailed examination of the roles Islam has played in Kurdish–Turkish relations, we offer a stringent test for the religion-conflict nexus by building on an original dataset on Turkey’s religious institutions for the past 37 years (1980–2016) encompassing nearly 90,000 state-sponsored mosques and more than 3,000 religious schools (*imam-hatip*) across the country.

The results highlight the need to qualify the religion–conflict relationship. In ethnic armed conflicts that involve coreligionists, the peacemaking role of religion fades as a result of religion turning into an instrument of mobilization in the hands of political entrepreneurs. Our findings show that the Turkish state’s involvement in religion and its increased investment in Islamization of the Kurdish region has had no discernible impact on lowering support for Kurdish political parties or insurgency.

The Contingent Nature of Religion and Conflict

Religion’s “salience to ethnic identity and conflict varies over time and place” (Fox 1997: 6). In conflicts where religion plays a key role among members of the same ethnicity (e.g., Algeria in the 1990s, where various armed Islamist groups fought a war against a government dominated by their co-ethnics who shared the same faith), religion assumes the role of ideology and often results in outbidding fueled by religious rivalry (Fox 2002; Platteau 2011). These conflicts

resemble ideological armed conflicts fought over the apparatus of the state. One recent study describes them as “revolutionary Islamist” as insurgents seek to “change the nature and character of the state” (Svensson and Nilsson 2018: 1133).

The complex relationship between religion and politics plays out differently in cases where the warring groups were separated by both ethnic and religious identities. This “mix of ethnic nationalism and religion,” Fox (2000:18) argues, “is potentially among the most explosive recipes for conflict.” In line with studies that have underlined the fluid and contingent nature of identity formation (Brubaker 2009; Posner 2004), the conflict in the Philippines that pitted Christians against several Muslim ethnic groups in the southern part of the country (i.e., Mindanao) has contributed to highlight the religious element in the southerners’ identity (Kaufman 2015). Zic (2017), examining the Bosnian civil war (1992-1995) that involved distinct ethno-religious groups, found that wartime experiences, particularly internal displacement, have helped strengthen religious identity and elevated support for religiously oriented political parties among Bosnian Muslims.

There is also a need to draw attention to conflicts involving different ethnicities that hail from the same faith but fight to redefine their relationship with the ruling group through autonomy or outright secession. This category makes up a slight majority of all intrastate armed conflicts in the past several decades. Svensson and Nilsson (2018), using the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) Dyadic Data Set, note that of the 420 conflict dyads between 1975 and 2015, 235 (56%) do not involve a religious dimension and that the constituencies of the government and the rebel group belong to the same religious identity. Gurses and Rost (2017: 340) report that “in about half of the ethnic civil wars that started and ended between 1950 and 2006, ethnic rebels shared the same religion as the governing ethnic group.” Another study points out that a clear majority

(61%) of all politically active ethnic minorities worldwide from 1990 to 1995 were not religiously distinct from the dominant group (Fox 1997: 3).

Furthermore, as noted earlier, existing studies rely primarily on detailed examinations of armed conflicts involving non-Muslim groups, or cases that include groups hailing from different faiths. Evidence from cases where belligerents belong to the Islamic faith points to a fundamentally different conflict–religion relationship. Aspinnall (2009), in an in depth analysis of the Aceh insurgency in Indonesia (1976–2005), demonstrates that as the Muslim Javanese-dominated Indonesian state appealed to Islam to weaken the Acehese claim to statehood, the Acehese began to see Muslim, Indonesian, and Acehese identities as distinct fields with boundaries that do not necessarily coincide. Gurses (2015; 2018), in his examination of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey, highlights how decades-long armed conflict has pushed many Muslim Kurds to reassess the religious bond between them and their co-religionist dominant Turks.

Due in part to the lack of an institutionalized hierarchy, a myriad of competing (and at times conflicting) readings of Islam (Brown 2000; Hashemi 2009) have enabled political actors to utilize Islam to strengthen their position and mobilize the masses. Kuru (2019), in an extensive analysis, highlights the significance of an independent ulema class (i.e., religious scholars or the learned) in the early ages of Islam in explaining the rise of an Islamic civilization that lasted for several centuries. The separation of religious specialists from the ruling class, Kuru argues, not only facilitated an intellectual debate in the first several centuries of Islam but also provided the ulema with a moral high ground in the eyes of the masses. Conversely, the ulema-state alliance, which has been a key part of politics in Muslim-majority societies since the mid-11th century, has stultified the progress and tarnished the image of religious leaders as a source of guidance.

The subjugation of the ulema to politics, or the politicization of Islam, in the context of armed conflict between co-religionist further weakens religion's peacemaking potential because religious leaders are no longer seen as "reflective of a high moral standing...to the extent that they can be regarded by all parties as apolitical or neutral" (Haynes 2009: 72). In such conflict situations religion often takes on various forms and turns into another instrument of mobilization. Consequently, religion ceases to function as societal glue as it turns into a subordinate to the realpolitik. Thus, in the context of war rather than binding belligerent ethnic groups, Islam is more likely to be utilized as a tool in combatants' arsenals of war, losing its overarching, transcending bond.

Below, we first offer a summary of how Islam has been weaponized by the Turkish state in its efforts to weaken Kurdish claim to equal rights as a distinct people. We then empirically demonstrate that such politicization of Islam has failed to deter Muslim Kurds from lending support for the secular ethno-nationalist Kurdish movement.

The Turkish Context: Religion as an Instrument

The instrumentalization of Islam at the hands of the Turkish state can be traced back to the latter half of the nineteenth century, during which the Ottoman Empire saw rapid socioeconomic change. To prevent further territorial losses, Sultan-Caliph Abdulhamid II (1876–1909) promoted Muslim unity and brotherhood among the different ethnic elements of the empire (Zurcher 2003: 79).

With the rise of modern Turkey in 1923 under Kemal Ataturk, Islam assumed a secondary position in the newly forged Turkish national identity. Turkey has officially been a secular state since 1937, but this secularism shows unique characteristics. Despite an official separation of state and religion, Turkey has come to manage Islam as another tool for socio-political

transformation projects. The state monopolized Hanefi school of Sunni Islam and has practically enforced it as the state's sanctioned religion throughout the country. This *sui generis* state involvement in religious affairs has resulted in the formation of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) which operates and funds essentially all mosques in the country. In other words, just as mosques are public institutions, imams are state employees (civil servants).¹

The new Turkish Republic resorted to Islam as a tool to assimilate the Kurds, despite its otherwise avowed commitment to the secularization of Turkish political culture. The state was not only reluctant to suppress Islamic Sufi orders but also provided support for or turned a blind eye to Islamic communities and groups (*Islami cemaatler*) in the Kurdish region (McDowall 2003: 399).

The state's endorsement of Islam as a means of "achieving a stricter political control over the society" (Merdianova 2018), what came to be known as the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis, gained momentum in the aftermath of the 1980 military coup. While the Synthesis was not necessarily a result of the challenge from the Kurds, the Turkish leftist movement of the 1970s was ideologically receptive to the Kurdish demands of recognition and equal rights. The leftist movement had many Kurds among its supporters, including Abdullah Ocalan, who founded the PKK in 1978 which subsequently began an armed insurgency against Turkey (Gunes 2012). General Kenan Evren, the leader of the 1980 coup and a key supporter of the Turkish-Islamic discourse, publicly offered Islamic brotherhood to win the Kurds over (Oran 1989).

The rise of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) to power in the early 2000s ushered in an era of optimism with an emphasis on solving the Kurdish conflict within the context of the European Union accession process (Onis 2009). This approach was later replaced with a new framework: one that stressed Islamic brotherhood as a cure for the

armed conflict, focusing on Islam as a common bond between Turks and Kurds (Yavuz 1999; Sarigil 2010; Somer and Evangelos 2010).

Despite such rhetoric of Islamic brotherhood, however, the AKP government, aiming at an Islamized version of Turkishness, has resorted to religion to weaken “the ethno-political nature of the Kurdish issue” (Kurt 2019: 356). As part of Islamization of the society, the AKP government has effectively turned the aforementioned Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) – which was formed in the early years of the Republic to bring Islamic education under state supervision – into a party apparatus to reinforce state-sanctioned Islam and promote Turkish nationalism at home and abroad (Öztürk 2016). The number of state-funded mosques, religious schools, and students enrolled in these schools has increased dramatically throughout Turkey under AKP rule.

Specifically, as we discuss in greater depth below, the state seems to have disproportionately invested in the Islamization project, as measured by the growth rate for mosques and religious schools, in the Kurdish region. Suffice it to say that between 1980 and 2016, Diyarbakir, the cultural and political heartland of Kurdish nationalism, saw a 56% increase in its mosques. As of 2016, the Kurdish-majority province of Diyarbakir, despite a significantly smaller population of 1.7 million, had more mosques than the Turkish-majority province of Bursa with a population of nearly 3 million people (2,011 versus 1,730).

In addition to such a disproportionate share of state-run religious institutions, since the 2000s the Kurdish region has seen a large increase in the number of Islamist civil society organizations in such fields ranging from education, to student housing, to humanitarian aid. Most of these organizations are affiliated with such Turkish Islamist groups as the Ensar Foundation and Ilim Yayma Cemiyeti or the Kurdish Hizbullah (Kurt 2019: 359).²

Given the salience of Islam among the Kurds, the PKK (a group with roots in Marxism) and the pro-Kurdish political parties who are often dismissed by the state as their fronts, also utilized Islam in their competition with the Turkish state. In the 1990s, the PKK leadership vocalized the need for religion in the fight against the state and its collaborators. Although staying loyal to its staunchly secular ideology, this strategy saw the insurgent group reach out to Kurdish religious figures to form organizations such as the Union of Patriotic Imams of Kurdistan (*Kurdistan Yurtsever Imamlar Birliđi*) and the Islamic Party of Kurdistan (*Kurdistan Islam Partisi*) (McDowall 2003: 40).

In early 2011, the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) called on its supporters to boycott mass Friday prayers at government-controlled mosques. Seeing mosques as an instrument of repression and dismissing state-employed imams as preaching loyalty to the state, the BDP organized alternative Friday prayers led by Kurdish imams as part of a civil disobedience campaign against government policies toward the Kurds (Sarigil and Fazlioglu 2013; Al 2019).

Over the course of three decades, the Kurdish movement (both the outlawed PKK and legal pro-Kurdish political parties) has grown to be more “accommodative” toward Islam due in part to an ideological shift the movement experienced in the post-2000s (Sarigil 2018). Furthermore, in its multipronged efforts to not only defend Kurdish identity but also redefine it, the movement has engaged what can be described as a “group-making project” (Aydin and Emrence 2015: 130). Moving away from a confrontational approach to Islam, the Kurdish movement has instead embraced a “Kurdified” version of Islam (Gurses 2015) in the process of ethnic boundary “making” or “expansion” (Sarigil 2018; Al 2019).³ This move was primarily driven by the need to counter “the rising popularity of the ruling conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP)

and the Kurdish Hizbullah in the early 2000s (Al 2019: 119).⁴ All in all, however, Islam has increasingly turned into a contested field with all parties and groups involved in the conflict utilizing it for their own purpose.

Data and Methods

To empirically examine the effectiveness of religion as a solution to the ethno-nationalist Kurdish insurgency in Turkey, we built on an original dataset containing data on Turkey's state-sponsored mosques between 1980 and 2016.

Outcome Variable: Our analyses include two sets of dependent variables. First, we utilize data on electoral support for pro-Kurdish political parties in each province between 1995 [the first year the People's Democracy Party (HADEP) participated in general elections on its own without making an electoral alliance with other parties] and 2015 [the year that the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) overcame the 10% electoral threshold]. Electoral support for the pro-Kurdish parties ranges from 0% to 79.29%, with a mean of 9.06% and a standard deviation of 13.49%.

We also use an alternative, more direct indicator of support for the Kurdish armed insurgency: the number of individuals who joined the PKK from Kurdish provinces between 1990 and 2012. Pro-Kurdish political parties operate and participate within the Turkish legal system, but have often been accused by the state of being a "mouthpiece" or a "front" for the PKK. As a result, many Kurdish political parties have been shut down by Turkey's Constitutional Court in the past two decades, while supporters and members of these parties have increasingly faced imprisonment and assassination (O'Connor and Baser 2018).

Data on these recruits came from the Kurdish Insurgency Militants (KIM) dataset (Tezcur 2016). The KIM dataset includes information on the number of individuals joining the PKK in

24 provinces with significant Kurdish populations between the late 1970s and 2012.⁵ Significantly, the dataset divides the three decades of armed conflict into 6 different periods to examine the PKK insurgency. The last four periods – covering the years 1990–94, 1995–99, 2000–04, and 2005–12 – are particularly relevant. The insurrection gathered steam in the 1990s, with hundreds of Kurdish men and women joining the militants. The Kurdish uprising was initially dismissed by the state as the work of “a few bandits.” The state’s utilization of Islam as a weapon gained momentum in the 1990s as the conflict grew. The recruit variable ranges from 1 to 547, with a mean of 47.58 and standard deviation of 83.01. We use the log of recruits to reduce skewness.

Explanatory Variable: To examine the impact of state-funded religious institutions on the level of support for the Kurdish ethno-nationalist movement, we utilize two measures. We collected data on the number of state-funded mosques in each province between 1980 and 2016 using publicly available sources, including the *Diyanet*’s own publications and the Turkish Statistical Institute’s website. While the *Diyanet* has been making a sustained effort to keep records of mosques per province since 2012, prior data is not readily available. Data for 1997–2002 comes from Onay (2006). We also consulted a variety of sources to gather data for other years, and reached out to the *Diyanet*, including interviewing former director Mehmet Gormez, and several other high officials to collect annual data for each province since 1980.⁶

As of 2016, Turkey had 87,550 state-funded mosques in its 81 provinces. The mosque variable ranges from 88 to 3,145, with a mean of 867.8 and standard deviation of 569.06. The period after the 1980 coup produced a political environment conducive to the rise of political Islam, but the growth rate for mosques during this period for the Kurdish provinces exceeded that of Turkish-majority parts of the country.

Next, we use data on imam-hatip schools. These schools were first introduced in 1951 to train Islamic clerics and preachers. Their numbers grew after 1950, when the center right political parties appealed to religious sentiment, reaching a total of 1,209 institutions (604 junior high and 605 senior high schools) in the 1997–98 academic year, serving nearly 400,000 students. The same year marked an anti-government campaign orchestrated by the Turkish army against the Islamist-led government resulting in the June 1997 collapse of the government. After this campaign, known as the “February 28 Process,” subsequent center-right and center-left coalition governments introduced a series of reforms to curb the power of Islamist groups and parties, such as closing junior imam hatip schools. By the time the AKP rose to power, there were around 64,000 students enrolled at 450 senior imam-hatip schools across the country (Yavuz 2003; Cakir and Talu 2004).

Successive AKP governments led by Tayyip Erdogan, himself an imam-hatip graduate, have scrapped restrictions on these schools. Seeking to “raise pious generations” (Lukuslu 2016), AKP governments have provided scholarships for students enrolled at imam-hatip schools, built new institutions, converted regular academies into imam-hatips, and assigned students who scored low marks to these establishments. The result has been a dramatic increase in the number of imam-hatip in the past decade. According to the statistics provided by the Ministry of National Education, as of the 2015–16 academic year there were more than 3,000 religious schools serving more than 1,200,000 students.⁷ We obtained data on these schools at the province level from the Ministry of National Education’s website.

As with the mosques, Kurdish provinces have received a disproportionate share. As shown in Table 1, while the Kurdish regions have noticeably lower levels of education measured by the total number of schools and senior high schools, the state has invested in Islamization of these

provinces through building more imam-hatip schools. Although the difference does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance, it nonetheless indicates an “equal” treatment of the Kurdish regions at the hands of state when it comes to allocating resources for religious education or building mosques. Kurdish areas in Turkey lack many government services and healthcare, but are specifically targeted for mosques and religious schools despite sharing the same religion as the Turkish majority.

[Table 1 Here]

Control Variables: We control for the effects of a range of socioeconomic and demographic variables to isolate the impact of our key explanatory variables on the outcome. The dependent variables – electoral support for pro-Kurdish political parties and total number of individuals joining the insurgency – are likely to be influenced by the level of education in the unit under analysis (province), total population, and whether the province is predominantly Kurdish. When estimating recruits per province – our second outcome variable – we also accounted for the number of the PKK fatalities and provincial distances to the national capital, using data provided in the KIM dataset. To reduce skewness in the distribution, data on mosques, recruits, population, total number of the PKK fatalities in each province, and distance to the national capital are logged. The descriptive statistics for the independent variables are presented in Table 2.

[Table 2 Here]

Estimation: While the Kurdish People’s Labor Party (HEP) formed an electoral alliance with the center-left Social Democratic Populist Party (SHP) in the 1991 general elections, pro-Kurdish political parties did not start contending for electoral support on their own until the 1995 elections, in which they won more than a million votes (4% of total votes cast nationwide).

Despite some fluctuation in the overall level of support for pro-Kurdish political parties, they managed to increase their vote share to 6% in 2002,⁸ and finally to 13% in June 2015, winning a total of more than six million votes.⁹

These results saw a significant decline in the governing AKP's vote share and prevented the formation of a majority government. In the follow-up snap elections in November 2015, held in an increasingly authoritarian environment, the HDP's seat count fell significantly from 80 to 59. Nevertheless, the party still exceeded the threshold with 10.8% of the total votes. We took the average vote share for these two elections to gauge the overall electoral support for the pro-Kurdish HDP and begin with presenting results from the 2015 national elections.

Religion and Electoral Support for the pro-Kurdish Political Parties

As shown in Models 1–3 of Table 3, the measures of state involvement in religion do not significantly predict support for the Kurdish political movement. The single most influential predictor for the support for the Kurdish party has to do with the ethnic composition of a given province and nothing to do with the total numbers of mosques or seminaries. Provinces that include a sizeable Kurdish population (at least 10% of the total population) are significantly more likely to vote for the Kurdish party even when measures of the state involvement in religious education are accounted for. As shown in Model 4, replacing the mosque variable used in the first three models with an alternate measure that accounts for the size of population (mosques per 100,000 people) does not substantially change the results.

[Table 3 Here]

While the vast majority of the HDP votes came from the Kurds, a number of non-Kurdish organizations lent their support to the party to curb AKP dominance (Gunes 2010). To offer a

more stringent test for our argument, we now present results from earlier elections starting in 1995. These results are shown in Table 4.

[Table 4 Here]

The results presented in Table 3 are based on the number of state-sponsored mosques and religious school in 2015, while the models in Table 4 present the average number of mosques in a province for each election period to better assess the effect of mosques. As a robustness check, we also used a three-year lag mosque variable to account for the lapse but largely obtained the same results.

As shown in Table 4, the mosque variable fails to significantly and consistently predict support for Kurdish political parties. The ethnic composition of a province, as measured by the percentage of Kurdish population, is again the best predictor of support for Kurdish parties. The coefficients on this variable suggest that an approximately 4% increase in Kurdish population leads to about 1% increase in the vote share of the Kurdish parties in the 1990s' elections. In the 2012 election, every two points of Kurdish population is associated with a more than 1% increase in the Kurdish party's vote share.

Next, given the geographic concentration of the Kurds and PKK insurgency, we limited our analysis to a sub-sample of provinces with at least 10% of total populations being Kurdish (n=24).¹⁰ Provinces with a higher rate of mosques appear to be significantly less supportive of the Kurdish parties in the 2002 and 2007 general elections. However, these findings are sensitive to model specification and time period. The 2002 and 2007 elections coincided with the Turkish government's efforts to peacefully resolve the Kurdish conflict. In these cases, increased optimism regarding a political solution to the Kurdish question might be responsible for such a finding. The same variable fails to significantly predict the outcome in the 1995, 1999, and 2012

elections (as well as the 2015 elections as presented in Table 3). While there was no severe multicollinearity issue in these truncated models, the total population variable was moderately correlated with the mosque variable. Removing the population variable and limiting the sample to those provinces with at least 40% of their population being Kurdish washes out the effect of the mosque variable.

Does Religion Affect Support for the PKK Insurgency?

We now present results when an alternative measure of support for the Kurdish movement is used. This is a more direct measure of support for the Kurdish insurgent group. A negative and significant coefficient for the mosque variable would provide support for the Islamic brotherhood thesis. The results presented in Table 5 empirically assess whether provinces with more mosques are less supportive of the PKK.

Before we present these findings, the issue of multicollinearity needs to be addressed. Unlike the samples used to obtain the results presented in Tables 3 and 4, this truncated sample contains only 21 Kurdish provinces. It is plausible to expect multicollinearity between some of our variables, especially between the total population and mosque variables (Ozcan 1994). A pairwise correlation shows that these two predictors are highly correlated ($r=.88$). Moreover, a variance inflation factor (*vif*) analysis produced fairly large values (ranging from 6 to 8) for the total population variable. We first examined the data with the population variable to check for the robustness of our findings. This variable was not only an insignificant predictor of recruits per province, but was also a key source of multicollinearity. Therefore, we present the results without this variable to better capture the impact of our key explanatory variable on the outcome.

[Table 5 Here]

The results presented in Table 5 furnish no evidence for the purported peacemaking potential of religion. Not only did the mosque variable fail to lower recruitment for the insurgency, but it is also positively associated with more recruits for the years 1995–99, 2000–04, and 2005–12.

To examine the religion–conflict relationship in the Kurdish regions a bit closer, we divided the sample into two groups. The first group includes 11 Kurdish provinces with at least 50% of their population being Kurdish, while the second group consists of ten provinces in which Kurds do not make up a majority. The Kurdish-majority provinces have a greater number of mosques than those with smaller Kurdish populations, supporting the argument that Islamization of these regions is part of an overall anti-Kurdish policy. A province’s number of mosques is not driven by population; both of our samples have about the same overall population, but different proportions of Kurds. While the state has been consistently investing in Islamization of the Kurdish regions, the Kurdish insurgent group has recruited heavily from these provinces as demonstrated in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 Here]

Despite Islamization to weaken the Kurdish uprising, war dynamics and the conflict’s ethnic nature have surpassed all other factors. Provinces witnessing direct conflict between the PKK and state forces, as measured by total PKK fatalities, are significantly more supportive of the insurgency. The coefficients on this variable suggest that one percentage change led to about a 40% change in the recruitment variable in the 1990s, when the fighting was most intense. These results dovetail with Henne’s main conclusion that government interference in religious institutions are, at best, ineffective in reducing violence (Henne 2019). The conflict has actually galvanized “Kurds to cling more tightly to their ethnic identity and to define themselves in contradistinction to the state-proscribed Turkish identity” (Gourlay 2018; Gurses 2018).

We also controlled for several other potential confounding variables such as altitude and percent population in rural area and obtained very similar results. The use of three-year lag mosque or mosque per capita variables yielded the same results. The findings illustrate that investment in religion as a counterinsurgency measure has had no effect on lowering support for Kurdish political parties or the armed insurgency. Similar to the findings presented in Tables 3 and 4, the ethnic variable, i.e., percent Kurdish population, seems to play a greater role in explaining support for the PKK.

Conclusion

Existing literature on the relationship between religion and conflict has highlighted various roles for faith. In this paper, we expand on this literature and argue that the role religion plays in armed conflict needs to be contextualized. While religion can be a source of both conflict and peace, when warring groups hail from the same faith it loses its peacemaking potential.

This article makes an important contribution to several bodies of research by joining the debate on the divergent roles religion plays in conflict transformation. First, the results vindicate previous studies that have pointed to the salient roles religion play in conflict dynamics but also call for the need to qualify these roles as religion is often weaponized in the warring groups' arsenals.

Second, existing studies have largely drawn on detailed examinations of armed conflicts involving non-Muslim groups, or cases that include groups hailing from different faiths. These studies do not effectively capture the long history of the "state-ulema alliance" in the Muslim world. Such politicization of Islam has produced multiple competing interpretations, turning religion into an instrument in the hands of political entrepreneurs. In other words, the war dynamics in the Kurdish case have forced all warring groups to resort to Islam. The same

dynamics have also resulted in the ethnicization of religion, resulting in Islam losing its putative role as a bond that transcends ethnic boundaries. As Muslim religious figures are reduced to partisans in conflict situations, they are more likely to be dismissed as peacemakers.

Finally, this study contributes to the literature on religion and conflict by bringing both qualitative and quantitative evidence from one of the longest lasting ethnic conflicts since WWII. This multi-method approach and the use of an original dataset shed additional light on the complex nature of the relationship between religion and war.

Table 1. State Investment in Religious Education in Kurdish Regions

Variable	Kurdish Regions (Mean)	Rest of the Country (Mean)	Difference (Sig. Level)
# of all Schools (1986-2003)	678.56 (n=262)	824.26 (n=1,107)	-64.97 (<.001)
# of High Schools per 100,000 People (Religious High Schools Excluded) (2015)	14.30 (n=15)	16.6 (n=66)	-2.29 (.05)
# of Religious High Schools per 100,000 People (2015)	2.07 (n=15)	1.88 (n=66)	.19 (.15)
% Change in # of Mosques (1980s)	13.2 (n=15)	9.7 (n=66)	3.43 (.19)
% Change in # of Mosques (1980–2016)	59.34 (n=15)	49.97 (n=66)	9.37 (.26)

Note: Kurdish Regions include those provinces with at least 40% Kurdish population. Data for the total number schools for the period of 1986–2003 come from Kibris (2015).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for the Variables

Variable	Min	Max	Mean	St. dev.	Table/Model
# of Mosques (logged)	4.8	8.1	6.7	.91	3/3
# of Religious Schools	3	365	38.39	46.51	3/3
# Senior High Schools per 100,000	9.8	30.2	16.7	40.008	3/3
Kurdish Province (Yes/No)	0	1	.29	.45	3/3
Average # of Mosques (logged)	4.78	8.06	6.7	.68	4/5
% Kurdish Population	.02	89.4	16.12	25.66	4/5
% Literacy	86.16	97.51	92.3	3.02	4/5
Average Population (logged)	11.23	16.44	13.2	.94	4/5
Average # of Mosques (logged)	4.75	7.41	6.4	.66	5/4
% Kurdish Population	15.81	80.48	50.06	22.21	5/4
% Literacy	81.9	92.96	86.2	3.4	5/4
# of PKK Fatalities (logged)	0	5.7	2.9	1.8	5/4
Distance in km to the Capital (logged)	6.5	7.2	6.9	.20	5/4

Table 3. Regression Results for Religion and Electoral Support for the pro-Kurdish HDP, 2015

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
# of Mosques (logged)	-2.47 [3.85]		-2.37 [3.86]	
# Mosques per 100,000 people				-.009 [.01]
# of Religious schools (total)		.03 [.02]	.03 [.02]	.04 [.02]
# of high schools per 100,000	-1.79** [.87]	-2.03** [.82]	-1.91** [.90]	-1.94** [.88]
Kurdish Province (Yes/No)	36.88*** [5.73]	36.9*** [5.78]	36.85*** [5.75]	36.63*** [5.73]
Total Population (logged)	-3.04 [3.88]	-6.48** [.322]	-4.77 [4.55]	-6.98** [3.30]
Constant	90.06* [46.84]	121.3** [52.6]	112.5** [57.4]	128.33** [52.29]
N	81	81	81	81
R-squared	.63	.63	.63	.63
Prob>F	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001

Note: * significant at 10 percent level; ** significant at 5 percent level; significant at 1 percent level (two-tailed). Robust standard errors in brackets.

Table 4. Regression Results for Religion and Electoral Support for the pro-Kurdish Parties, 1995–2012

Variable	Model 1 (1995)	Model 2 (1999)	Model 3 (2002)	Model 4 (2007)	Model 5 (2012)
Average # of Mosques (logged)	-1.35 [1.37]	-2.30 [1.91]	-3.38* [.197]	-3.04 [1.95]	-2.36 [2.53]
% Kurdish Population	.27*** [.09]	.27*** [.06]	.38*** [.07]	.35*** [.07]	.57*** [.09]
% Literacy	-.23 [.20]	-.42* [.25]	-.45* [.26]	-.53 [.41]	-.57 [.62]
Average Total Population (logged)	1.35 [1.120]	2.12* [1.27]	2.40* [1.30]	1.81 [1.46]	1.78 [1.88]
Constant	11.71 [13.95]	25.81 [19.80]	32.0 [20.09]	45.18 [32.74]	45.34 [51.31]
N	80	81	81	81	81
R-squared	.74	.785	.87	.82	.82
Prob>F	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001

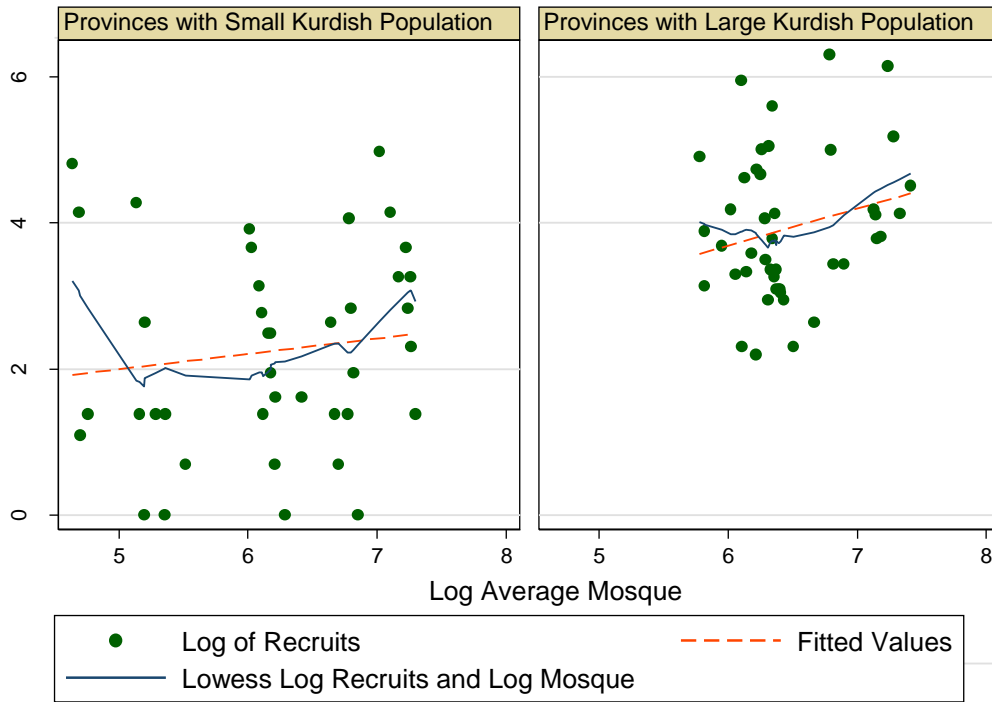
Note: * significant at 10 percent level; ** significant at 5 percent level; significant at 1 percent level (two-tailed). Robust standard errors in brackets.

Table 5. Regression Results for Religion and Support for the PKK, 1995–2012

Variable	Model 1 (1990–94)	Model 2 (1995–99)	Model 3 (2000–04)	Model 4 (2005–12)
Average # of Mosques (logged)	.16 [.29]	.37* [.21]	1.05*** [.18]	.64** [.27]
% Kurdish Population	.01* [.009]	.008 [.009]	.02*** [.009]	.01* [.01]
% Literacy (age 6 and over)	-.03* [.01]	-.02 [.02]	-.01 [.02]	-.06 [.05]
# of PKK Fatalities (logged)	.37** [.17]	.41*** [.09]	.14 [.10]	.06 [.10]
Distance to the Capital (logged)	.13 [.95]	-1.20 [.89]	1.002 [.61]	1.99* [1.09]
Constant	2.50 [7.35]	9.35 [7.64]	-11.97* [6.15]	-10.87 [10.10]
N	21	21	21	21
R-squared	.69	.79	.90	.77
Prob>F	<.001	<.0001	<.0001	<.0001

Note: * significant at 10 percent level; ** significant at 5 percent level; *** significant at 1 percent level (two-tailed). Robust standard errors in brackets.

Figure 1. Religion and Support for the PKK



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Endnotes

¹ For more on the secular nature of modern Turkey, see Kuru (2007).

² For a detailed account of Kurdish Hizbullah, see Kurt (2017).

³ Sarigil and Fazlioglu (2014) find that Shafi Kurds, who make up a vast majority of the Kurds, are more supportive of the Kurdish ethno-nationalist movement as opposed to Hanefi Kurds who are by and large are pro-AKP (i.e., the state). This finding further confirms the emerging ethnicization of Islam in Turkey.

⁴ Despite a notable transformation in the past decades, the PKK differs from other Kurdish groups such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) that dominates the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in its approach to religion and tradition. While the PKK has long argued for and aimed at a revolutionary change in both social and political culture of the Kurds, the KDP is characterized by a more conservative approach to social culture and is more explicitly nationalistic than the PKK. For a helpful comparison, see Ahmed (2018).

⁵ Our analysis does not include Malatya, Maras, and Sivas provinces, for two main reasons. First, the KIM dataset does not include these provinces as they do not have substantial Kurdish populations. Second, unlike the KIM dataset, our unit of analysis is not district but province. This leaves us with 21 Kurdish provinces.

⁶ Due mainly to the current political environment in Turkey, these officials asked to remain anonymous.

⁷ These numbers do not include 121,335 students enrolled at open/online religious high schools.

See

http://sgb.meb.gov.tr/meb_iys_dosyalar/2016_03/30044345_meb_istatistikleri_orgun_egitim_2015_2016.pdf accessed on 22 September 2017.

⁸ <http://www.secim-sonuclari.com/1995> accessed on 22 September 2017.

⁹ <https://secim.haberler.com/7-haziran-2015-secimi/> accessed on 22 September 2017.

¹⁰ To save space these results are not presented.