

The Stockholm Journal

OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

**DECADE OF SYRIAN
CIVIL WAR – WHERE
IS THE MEDIA
COVERAGE?**

**HOW ERDOĞAN'S
IMMIGRATION POLICY
IS DEHUMANIZING
SYRIANS IN TURKEY**

**THE CONFLICT
BETWEEN
TURKEY AND PKK
EXPLAINED**

**ECONOMIC AND
GEOPOLITICAL
CONSIDERATIONS IN
THE QUESTION OF
KURDISTAN**





A word from the editor

Elmer E. Schattschneider's had once said it clear: "Some issues are organized into politics, while others are organized out" (1960: 71). By this, he meant that rather often the visibility of an issue reveals its level of politicization. Consequently, when an issue loses visibility, it disappears from the political agenda. Likewise, if an issue is not on the political agenda, politicians will not consider it important enough to dedicate time and solutions.

In connection with the above, some depoliticized issues are the ongoing civil war in Syria and the refugee crisis, the political situation of Kurdistan and the persecution of Christians in the Middle East.

Considering the importance of giving visibility to these groups and issues, this edition of The Stockholm Journal features an article regarding the situation of Syria and, especially, the difficulty of spreading awareness through journalism. Similarly, this edition includes a special report from the journalist Yavuz Altun about Erdogan's dehumanizing immigration policies regarding Syrians in Turkey. Subsequently, given the geopolitical importance of the Kurdish people, two articles explain both the struggle for independence and the role of the Kurdistan Workers' Party in Turkey. Finally, a commentary on the persecution of Christians in the Middle East.

All things considered, we hope that this feature will raise awareness and give visibility to these issues. Also, we wish that by reading the Stockholm Journal, you will get more interested in foreign affairs and human rights.

Daniel H. B. Gamez, Editor-in-Chief

Schattschneider, E. E. 1960. *The Semi-Sovereign People*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston

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Decade of Syrian civil war – Where is the media coverage?

Since the Arab Spring in 2011

a civil war has been occurring in Syria and it has been covered in the global media. The parties in the conflict are those who follow the president Bashar Al-Assad and the rebellious group the Islamic State. One outcome of this civil war is the refugee crisis that shook the world in 2015. At that time, the media coverage was wide. But why is there not more information reaching the global audience in 2022?

Early in the civil war, journalists from the US, Europe, Asian countries and more, were recorded being beheaded by ISIS for the world to watch. The videos were sent to the American president as well as the media for the world to see and it caught much attention. Not only by the inhuman assassinations, but the cruelty of the message sent was frightening to the viewers. According to CPJ, (Committee to protect journalists), 139 journalists were killed in Syria during the last 20 years. On the index of press freedom from reporters without borders, Syria ranked number 173 out of 180 in 2021.

This makes Syria one of the most dangerous countries for journalists to operate in, locals as well as foreigners. The journalistic goal to spread awareness and inform its citizens and

the rest of the world of the conflict becomes close to an impossible task. This is because the journalist's life is at stake when fighting for democracy through journalism, in such an authoritarian regime. At the same time, it is easy for the western world to see the media as a failed institution for not continuing to report on the ongoing conflict in Syria. Another important task of the media professionals is to protect the people living in Syria who do not agree with the values of ISIS in the way of source protection. Since there is such high censorship and control over the internet, getting information from sources and keeping them anonymous comes with a high risk for them to lose their lives as well.

According to a timeline by CNN, the Islamic state was founded in Iraq in 2006. It was not until 2013 that ISIS recognized itself as an al Qaeda military group. Their promise was to support Sunni Muslims over the world, this showed not to be true as Muslims describe the group as not having Islamic values at all, as Islam is a religion of forgiveness and compassion.

They started occupying cities in Syria, which later brought them to work south towards Iraq. They were very recruitment-oriented and managed to recruit not only locals but also

foreigners from all over the world to join. Such as young Europeans and US citizens who felt inspired to be a part of something bigger than themselves. Some of them moved from countries with high economical, political, and equality development. According to a report by the National Bureau of Economic Research, 30,000 foreign soldiers from 85 different countries had joined ISIS in Syria and Iraq as of December 2015. There were also those recruited who chose to stay in their homeland to implement ISIS values themselves.

11 years after the Arab Spring started, the president in Syria is still in power since 2000. The French public service company France24, reports that the reason why Bashal Al-Assad is still standing as president, is due to that there is lack of replacements for someone to take his spot. This is also the reason why Russia offered to support, help and restore the Syrian government.

Beatrice Wihlander, Södertörn University



"139 journalists were killed in Syria during the last 20 years"

How Erdogan's immigration policy is dehumanizing Syrians in Turkey

In mid-November this year, Tanju Özcan, the Turkish mayor of the northwestern city of Bolu, announced that the foreign nationals would pay a 100,000 TL (approximately 7,200 \$) fee if they wanted to get married in the Bolu district. "We are doing this to prevent two more Syrians or two more Iraqis from getting married here," he explained in a press conference.

The move drew a lot of social media criticism from the journalists, activists, and politicians, but at the same time many others were supporting it. The motion, along with the mayor's previous proposal to significantly increase the water service fee for immigrants in the Bolu district, was approved by the municipal council end November.

After listening to his press conferences, one can think of Özcan, a member of Turkey's main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), as a prototype of the 21st century extreme right-wing politician who is fiercely resisting the idea of immigration. Mainstream media and centrist politicians tend to ignore Özcan-like hatemongers, seeing them as solitary attention-seekers.

However, a recent opinion poll in August conducted by Turkey's respected MetroPOLL research company shows that 66,5 percent of the Turkish voters backs the idea of closing all the borders to the immigrants, particularly Syrians. According to another poll, from the Aksoy research company, more than 58 percent of Turks expect their government to send all Syrians back to their country. In the same poll, nearly 34 percent say that they are eager to see a forcible government action if necessary.

Although the anti-immigrant sentiment in Turkey has horribly grown in the last couple of years, it was not the case all along.

Turkey opened its doors to the Syrian immigrants immediately after the civil war erupted in Syria in 2011. The number of protected Syrians in the country increased from nearly 225,000 in 2013 to over 3,5 million in 2018 and onwards. Including the other ethnic groups, by

2021, some 4,5 million immigrants are residing in the Turkish soil.

Initially, Turkey's Muslim conservatives, who largely vote for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), were supportive of the government's open-border policies for Syrians, who were, for them, "brothers and sisters" due to a shared religious background. Moreover, they were "guests" in a country that is seen as famous for its hospitality.

While Turkey is a party to the Geneva Convention, Ankara only grants refugee protection to individuals from Europe. Thus, Syrians have a special kind of protection granted by the Turkish government, which allows them eligibility for Turkish citizenship after five-year residence in Turkey. The Turkish government initially called Syrian immigrants "guests" de-



spite experts warning that at least half of the Syrian immigrants would continue their stay in Turkey even if the civil war ended.

When the so-called refugee crisis erupted in 2015 due to an exponential growth in the numbers of Syrians passing the Greek border, Turkey has become, in European leaders' eyes, a "waiting room" for the immigrants who were seeking to reach Europe. Turkey's strongman Recep Tayyip Erdogan **would not wait long to capitalize on desperation of Europe and use Syrian immigrants as a political bargaining chip.** The details of this morally and politically horrifying agreement were revealed when the minutes of a 2016 meeting between Erdogan and EU's previous leaders Jean-Claude Juncker and Donald Tusk were leaked. A price tag was put on the Syrian immigrants during the meeting.

"We can open the doors to Greece and Bulgaria anytime and we can put the refugees on buses ... So how will you deal with refugees if you don't get a deal? Kill the refugees?" Erdogan was quoted while addressing the European officials and demanding more money for keep-

ing the Syrian immigrants inside Turkey's borders. That was when policymakers in broader European area put a price tag on immigrants, deepening the level of dehumanization and oppression that the immigrants have already been facing.

Even though a deal was brokered between Turkey and the EU, Erdogan has kept threatening the EU bloc of opening the borders and letting the migrants leave for Europe, in full confidence that he had finally found the Achilles' heel of the Europe. Just before the Covid-19 pandemic, Turkey, this time for real, opened its borders with Greece, and even organized means of transportation to bring immigrants to their dream destination, Europe.

The political narrative Erdogan has been using in his communication with the EU, however, has been simultaneously changing the public view towards the immigrants, who have been increasingly perceived as the pawns in a grand international chess game. All other issues relating to their needs, dreams, and future in Turkey is reduced to a discussion about Erdogan's self-proclaimed strong man



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tactics. In addition, the Turkish opposition has reiterated the idea that Syrians would be deported to their home country when Erdogan was finally toppled in the next elections.

In the meantime, the voters in Turkish metropoles backed the opposition parties in the 2019 local elections, meaning Erdogan's party was defeated in Istanbul and Ankara for the first time in the last 25 years. Analysts argued that this significant change in the voting behavior was partly caused by the unease against the government's immigration policies. As a result, a frenzy of deporting "undocumented" Syrians and immigrants from other ethnic origins living in Istanbul, the largest city in Turkey, was initiated by the interior ministry.

That unease among public, as expected, has been growing every single day, while Turkey's economy is deteriorating and, in return, the Erdogan government is becoming increasingly oppressive. The physical and verbal attacks against the newcomers, especially in the urban areas, go unnoticed many times. The widespread discrimination and othering also target non-Syrian immigrants from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

Recently, Sözcü, an influential newspaper

among the Turkish dissents, drew attention to a district in Ankara, the capital city of Turkey, claiming that the Somalian immigrants had created a small Somalia on the streets. Shortly after, Somalian shopkeepers and restaurant owners in Ankara were handed their deportation papers issued by the Turkish government and were forced by the police to sell their enterprises to Turkish citizens. In the same vein, a couple of years ago, many Syrian shop owners were barred from using Arabic letters on display windows or signboards in several cities.

In an anticipated post-Erdogan era in Turkey, the challenges for the immigrants will likely keep mounting, as the country's opposition parties are not eager to address the rising public hostility against immigrants. When opposition achieves power, they will treat immigrants as a problem created by the oppressive Erdogan regime and yet they may not satisfactorily address the quick solution demands of frustrated Turks by knocking on the doors of EU.

Yavuz Altun

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The conflict between Turkey and PKK explained

The conflict between Turkey and Kurdistan's Worker's Party (PKK) has been ongoing for 35 years and resulted in nearly forty thousand deaths.

PKK – founded by Abdullah Ocalan in 1978 – has been aiming to establish an independent Kurdish state, including greater culture and political rights, while Turkey aims to establish and broaden its safety zone along the border with Syria.

With many conflicts and attacks happening in the middle east, it can be confusing to understand why and whom the countries are fighting. There is one link that connects the countries of Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq besides their borders: Kurdistan's Worker's Party (PKK). The PKK were established by mostly left-leaning Kurdish students led by Abdullah Ocalan in 1974. However, their aim of establishing an independent state of Kurdistan is based on a complex history and a broken agreement.

In the Ottoman Empire, regions were loosely defined by ethnicity. However, the idea of these regions acting as separate nation-states with their nationalities did not exist outside of academic circles.

A few years after the end of WWI in 1922 – the Ottoman Empire came to an end and in the Treaty of Sevres of 1920, it was documented to divide Turkey into several parts, giving those to other countries, such as Italy, Greece, Britain, etc. That same treaty also stated the possibility for Kurdish people to have their autonomous state.

Sadly, this never was materialized, and Kurds still live suppressed up to this day.

Kurds represent the world's largest ethnic

group without a home country and a total population of approx. 30-40 million. They are of Indo-European descent and one of the indigenous people of the Mesopotamian plains and highlands in what is now south-eastern Turkey, north-eastern Syria, northern Iraq, north-western Iran, and south-western Armenia. The majority of Kurds live in Turkey, representing almost half of their people with 14-20 million within the country. The remaining Kurds are represented further in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Germany. They share cultural elements and language dialects.

At the beginning of the 20th century, many Kurds began considering the establishment of a homeland, which would be generally referred to as 'Kurdistan'. According to a reportage video by DW News from 2019, **Kurds in Turkey have feared severe government suppression for decades partly in response to the Kurdish separatist movement.** Although Kurds make up 15-20% of the population in Turkey, they often don't have the same civil rights as Turks. Instead, they have faced forced resettlement as well as denial of their identity and customs.

Until 1991, words like 'Kurds', 'Kurdistan', and 'Kurdish' were officially banned by the government. People who had published, spoken or sang in Kurdish were arrested. Turkey had justified their harsh stance against Kurdish identity as necessary to do armed uprisings



from Kurds seeking independence. It considers PKK a terrorist group and blames them for the deaths of thousands of soldiers and civilians.

After peaceful Arab Spring protests in Syria in 2011 turned into a civil war, the country's Kurdish groups started getting involved as well. **Kurdish fighters were trained and supported by the US who wanted to stop the spread of ISIS followers in the region.**

And with success, they managed to drive out ISIS forces out of northern Syria while the local Kurdish militia started governing the land they have captured – which resulted in a quarter of the Syrian landmass including most of the border region with Turkey. Similarly, to Kurds in Iraq, Syrian Kurds established their government and had military and administrative control. It finally brought some independence for the Syrian minority.

Turkey has long feared that the Kurdish autonomy in Syria could feed the separatist movement in Turkey where the majority of Kurds live.

As of now, the Kurds remain without a country of their own, often living in a legal grey zone

and are still in need of fundamental rights. When former US President Donald Trump pulled back the US military troops from Syria – the border to Turkey was left on the open and Turkey saw it as an opportunity to finally establish its wanted 'safety-zone'. Turkey's plan behind a safety zone is supposed to house Syrian refugees in a secure area along its border with Syria while keeping it free from Kurdish fighters.

Jasmin Adolph
Södertörn University



Economic and geopolitical considerations in the question of Kurdistan

The question of Kurdish independence is one of the most protracted debates in the contemporary Middle East. The Kurds are the 4th largest ethnic group in the region and the largest ethnic group globally without a state. They total around 30-40 million people worldwide. The issue of Kurdish independence is noteworthy due to the Kurds' sizeable population in the Middle East. Such actors can influence regional dynamics and contribute to our understanding of the constantly shifting political climate.

The Kurds are concentrated around the conjoining border areas of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran predominately. To contextualise this, after the end of the first world war and the fall of the Ottoman Empire, European powers promised the Kurds their own country. This didn't occur and instead, Syria and Iraq were carved out of a portion of the pre-existing Ottoman territory through the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916. Turkey's borders were finalised in 1923 and the former Ottoman-Iran border remained. Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran have brutally oppressed the Kurds and restricted their shared culture and language ever since, while the Kurds have continually attempted to combat the colonial demarcation of these borders.

Recent Kurdish developments have included, Kurdish-backed, the People's Democratic Party (HDP) participating in the Turkish political system, constituting the third-largest parliamentary group in the 2015 elections. Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go for them to be taken seriously. In Iraq, the Kurds

have had a semi-autonomous zone since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 1992, considered the embryo of Kurdistan. This is partly due to the independence referendum in 2017, where 92.7% of those living in the zone voted 'yes' for the creation of an independent state. In Iran, Kurdish parties participate in the political system, but the Kurds still face discrimination and underdevelopment in their region. Moreover, in Syria, the Kurds played a fundamental role in defeating ISIS but still experience severe oppression by the central government. There are diverging levels of political agency for the Kurds across these regions which complicates the question of Kurdish independence further.

Economic factors are influencing the Kurdish independence debate. The relative stability in Iraqi Kurdistan, due to the partial success of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), has facilitated an economic boom. However, the sheer natural wealth of oil and gas reserves in the Kurdish regions is a reason as to why the surrounding countries seek to restrict Kurdish secession. **Iraqi Kurdistan holds 1/3 of Iraq's oil reserves with the Kirkuk oil field being the site of regular skirmishes.**

Additionally, some of Turkey's largest industries, such as furniture production, are outsourced to the Kurdish areas, where Kurdish autonomy would threaten a large part of the Turkish economy. Turkey also has a vested interest in the natural wealth of the Kurdish areas, where Turkey is Iraqi Kurdistan's 3rd largest trade partner.

This seems counterintuitive but illuminates the desire for the Kurdish areas to build their economy for a stronger footing on the regional stage, while equally illustrating the surrounding states' hold over the Kurdish area. The economic potential of the Kurdish regions highlight why Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria are reluctant to give the Kurds autonomy.

Geopolitical factors also affect the question of Kurdish independence. Kurdish fighters have been heavily involved in the Syrian civil war and Iraq as a force against the jihadists of the Islamic State. While the Kurdish armed groups helped fight against ISIS, President Assad of Syria has vowed to reclaim all Syrian territories, including the Kurdish area, and there are continuing disputes over whether Kurdish rights will continue to be disregarded or whether they will be rewarded for their efforts. In Iraqi Kurdistan, there are clashes between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Worker's Party of Kurdistan (PKK) which undoubtedly undermines a fledgling state. The Iraqi central government also failed to accept the 2017 independence referendum, undercutting legitimacy of the semi-autonomous zone further. Additionally, the exclusion of Mosul from the Kurdish area, means it may be weaker. In regards to Iran, the central government is anti-Kurdish separatism because of the KRG's alliances with Western states, which could provide a platform for them in the Middle East. Furthermore, Turkey does not want to encourage ethnic nationalism in any form and has troops stationed on a buffer zone on the Turkish-Kurdish Syrian border. This is vital for the question of Kurdistan as if there is Kurdish agency in Syria and Iraq, it will fuel it in Turkey. Any Kurdish agency in one state causes issues for the other three.

The prospect of Kurdish independence seems unattainable in the near future. This is due to the economic potential of the region which continues to be exploited by neighbouring states. The geopolitical dynamics of the region contribute too, where Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran have diverging interests in the Kurdish areas, with restricting independence being in their national interest. Moreover, it will be especially interesting to see how the ongoing Syrian civil war affects these dynamics further. Perhaps a federalised Kurdish government is more plausible or further involvement and recognition by the international community. Nonetheless, a lack of cohesion and consensus with the KRG and central governments of the surrounding states means a Kurdish homeland remains a distant idea.



"Iraqi Kurdistan holds 1/3 of Iraq's oil reserves with the Kirkuk oil field being the site of regular skirmishes."



FORSAKEN. The tragedy of the Arab Christians in the Middle East

The geography of the Middle East (ME) is packed with places of profound religious significance. It is here where Judaism and Christianity originated, Islam, a distant late comer from Arabia. This land is holy to all three but, while Judaism thrives in Israel and ninety percent of the population in this region are Muslim, what does the future hold for Christians in the ME?

Today, the West is self-absorbed in an identity crisis that questions its Christian roots, diluting them in a mixture of guilt, political correctness, cancel culture and not wanting to offend. Europeans seem obsessed about minor cases of Islamophobia that occur on the fringes of Western society, while its American counterparts are engaged in a reactionary movement intent on erasing any Christian (or Western for that matter) trace from their history. Meanwhile, little attention is paid to the plight of their fellow coreligionists in far-away places.

From my time in Nigeria, I remember hearing about the first attacks against Christians by Boko Haram; from Jordan, my conversations with my Arab-Christians landlords concerning the future of their faith in the region. A visit there to an Orthodox church during mass left me overwhelmed by a Eucharist loaded with dramatic rituals and a certain air of de-

feat I thought I perceived at the time. But these are personal memories, now the facts.

With 2,300,000, **Christianity is today the largest religion in the world**. Nonetheless, according to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, **it is also the most persecuted**, indeed, close to one hundred and fifty thousand Christians are murdered every year for their religious beliefs. What journalist Fernando de Haro calls a proper genocide.

A good way to measure the level of tolerance of a region is through the prism of its minorities. In this sense, in countries like Nigeria, Syria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq, Christians are suffering. Certainly, persecution does not come only in Muslim countries, but also from political-religious groups such as Hinduism and, political and economic doctrines such as Communism. For the sake of the topic at hand, we will focus on the two countries where the situation is most compelling: Iraq and Syria. In this regard, two events mark a decline that deepens each passing day: the Iraq invasion of 2003 and the Arab Spring.

Shortly before launching the invasion of Iraq, the President of the USA received Father Pio Laghi, an envoy from Pope John Paul II, who warned him that a war in Iraq would cause instability and widen an already-existing rift between Arab Christians and Muslims. The message went unheeded.

Consequently, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the power vacuum generated and the chaos that ensued created the perfect conditions for extremism to thrive. From those ashes came ISIS in 2014. After the fall of Mosul, ISIS demanded that the Assyrian Christians living in the city convert to Islam, pay the Jizyah or face execution. Many chose martyrdom and now lay in unmarked mass graves beneath the Iraqi desert. Today, ISIS has been significantly weakened, but are Christians returning to Mosul? Nadia Murad, a survivor of the Yazidi genocide by ISIS, narrates in *The Last Girl* that a pervasive mistrust lingers because many of their Muslim neighbors welcomed ISIS making a return unlikely. **From a community of 1,500,000 Christians, three hundred thousand remain in Iraq today.**

In 2011, a wave of popular revolts shook the Arab World. The failure of many of these movements favoured the development of radicalism and exacerbated sectarian conflicts in the region. In some places, like Syria, the Christians had pushed for reforms but not an overthrowing. Once the free for all violence started, they were forced to side with Bashar al-Assad, who had afforded them protection prior to the revolts. Now, when the Alawite regime has crushed the upris-

ing, Christians suffer the resentment of the defeated Sunni population and feel exposed and insecure in their own country. In the land where the word Christianity was forged, two million Christians face an uncertain future.

Throughout history, there has been a constant effort by the Arab Christians to show that they are an integral part of the societies in which they live. Christians were prominent in the XIX century and took part in the cultural movements that led to an Arab Renaissance. They participated actively in anti-colonial demonstrations; the founder of Pan Arabism and the Baath party in Iraq was Michel Aflaq, a Greek Orthodox; the Waft Party, the most important in the first half of the XX century in

“From a community of 1,500,000 Christians, three hundred thousand remain in Iraq today.”





Egypt, had important Christian members. During the Arab Spring, political activist and member of the Coptic Church in Egypt, George Isaac, led peaceful demonstrations against Hosni Mubarak. Nevertheless, and despite representing the longest standing tradition of Christianity, the fact that the Muslim majority considers this “their land” makes Arab Christians feel like second class citizens in their own country.

A century ago, Christians amounted to nearly twenty percent of the population in the ME, today it is barely four. **For the first time, more Middle Eastern Christians are living abroad than in their actual homeland, and the diaspora continues.**

Many Arab Christians describe the current climate as one of desperation and persecution. “What is the point of staying if we cannot worship freely” they respond to their leaders call to stay and bear witness to their faith.

In his book, correspondent Dan Williams shrewdly points out that this is not only a matter of humanitarian but also of historical proportions. Once there was hope that the Christian Arabs liv-

David Bayon
Freelance journalist

ing in the ME would contribute to the understanding of Islam in the West and vice-versa. Should this resilient but exhausted community disappear from this part of the world, so could the last hope for tolerance in the region.



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